

# Infants, childhood and language in Agamben and Cavell: Education as transformation

**Stefan Ramaekers & Joris Vlieghe**

Stefan Ramaekers (corresponding author)  
Laboratory of Education and Society, KU Leuven  
[stefan.ramaekers@ppw.kuleuven.be](mailto:stefan.ramaekers@ppw.kuleuven.be)

Joris Vlieghe  
Institute for Education, Community and Society, University of Edinburgh  
[Joris.Vlieghe@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Joris.Vlieghe@ed.ac.uk)

**Abstract**

In this paper we explore a new way to deal with social inequality and injustice in an educational way. We do so by offering a particular reading of a scene taken from Minnelli's film *The Band Wagon* which is often regarded as overly Western-centered and racist. We argue, however, that the way in which words and movements in this scene function are expressive of an event that can be read as a new beginning and that it is for this reason *in and of itself* educational. By drawing on Agamben's and Cavell's insights on childhood and what it means to acquire a language, we argue that in this scene a form of childhood is displayed which denotes a general condition for education to take place in children and grown-ups alike. Hence, education can be understood as a (temporary) interruption of existing power structures and as a transformation of one's existence.

**Keywords**

Agamben, Cavell, Arendt, education, transformation, childhood, infancy

## Introduction

Our text<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to articulate an understanding of education as transformation through a particular reading of a fragment of film taken from Minnelli's film *The Band Wagon* (1953)<sup>2</sup>. We kindly invite the reader to first watch the specific scene<sup>3</sup> we are referring to, as any description – like the one we attempt here – can only partially recount the actions taking place, and can only flimsily catch, particularly in this case, the unusual mood that permeates this episode. In this scene, Fred Astaire, playing the aging musical star Tony Hunter in search for a second career, is in a penny-arcade. At a certain moment, he stumbles over the feet of a shoeshine 'boy', a black adult person who is portrayed in a very stereotypical way: shabby, goofy and cack-handed. Their gazes meet and Astaire starts a song, apparently forgetting the nagging doubts he had concerning his future career. While getting his shoes polished – Astaire sitting comfortably in a high chair and the black man kneeling in front of him – the big star continues singing, demonstrating his skills as one of the world's best tap-dancers. All this causes an atmosphere of cheerfulness. As the scene develops this particular mood only increases, as Astaire seems to become literally overpowered by an urge to move about the place, tapping heel and toe to the floor in an ever increasing frenzy, which – so it seems – is unstoppable. The fast and syncopating rhythm of his over-excited moves is echoed by the words he sings: the song, which started as a mere poetical comment on a very banal event ('When there is a shine on your shoes, there is a melody in your heart. What a wonderful way to start the day. '), becomes itself prone to a rhythmical frenzy. Astaire isn't able to stop the flow of his words, which at a certain moment consists in nothing but the endless repetition of the same words: 'shoeshine, shoeshine'. And so the scene comes to a climax, where Astaire and the shoeshine boy perform a shared and frenetic dance. When their dance is over the black servant is sitting on his knees, left to stay in the Arcade, whilst the star of the movie, still standing upright, leaves the Arcade, brightly smiling.

In this paper we will defend that this scene deserves the attention of philosophers of education because it exemplifies an *educational* moment par excellence. We are prompted to this reading by some ideas of Stanley Cavell which we will develop further here in dialogue with another philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. Our approach is atypical, because we choose to leave out of consideration the whole of the film from which this scene is taken, and focus simply on this sequence alone – thus solely taking into account the words and movements that we see taking place during four minutes of film. We believe that this approach allows for bringing something to presence that remains out of view when these words and

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier and much shorter version of this paper has been presented at the 2014 PES conference in Albuquerque and will appear in the PES Yearbook under the title "The show of childhood. Agamben and Cavell on education and transformation". The reader will also find there a response to our paper by Paul Standish.

<sup>2</sup> In his book *Philosophy the day after tomorrow* (2005), Stanley Cavell discusses two scenes from this film. We would like to thank Paul Standish for the seminar he held on these scenes (as part of a doctoral colloquium) at the Institute of Education (London) in the Fall of 2012, during which he presented his reading of these scenes. It is important to point out that, in this paper, we do not go into these scenes as such, but focus on a very specific part of one of these scenes (see footnote 3). Furthermore, Standish' reading, if our recollection is correct here, is partly based on what Cavell (2005) has to say about these scenes, but is also informed by a psychoanalytical framework. In this paper we try to offer another reading of a part of one of these scenes on the basis of a conjoined reading of specific aspects of the work by Agamben and Cavell.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gbb4kEk3NbQ>.

movements get an interpretation in terms of a larger story in which they get a precise place and meaning. We acknowledge and are appreciative of other readings of this scene. Paul Standish e.g. (in his reply to an earlier version of this text; see Standish, 2014) draws attention to a certain subversion of gender roles happening in this scene, i.e. Astaire acting in a rather effeminate way and enjoying this). On a different note, Gooding Williams (2006) argues that the scene is a blameful display of the prejudice that black people are bursting with libidinal energy – reading the confrontation between the shoe shine boy (wearing a brightly coloured shirt and far less shabbily looking than we suggest) and Astaire as a kind of resourcing he would be after. It is not so much that we want to argue with these readings, but rather want to offer an alternative reading that allows to articulate an educational moment understood in a specific way.

Apart from this, the ideas we develop here do go against the grain of another, more common way to deal with this kind of cinema, which can be easily read as overly western-centered and racist. Wholly aiming our attention at this particular scene alone, we will argue for a view that takes this scene *in and of itself* as educational: without wanting to deny what is plainly and painfully visible – a reaffirmation of the white man’s superiority and a legitimization of a structural form of injustice –, we argue that the way in which words and movements in this scene function are expressive of an event that can be read as a new beginning. This is to say that we define education in the way Hannah Arendt (2006) does, viz. in terms of the possibility of a (temporary) interruption of existing power structures and of the coming into being of something new and unforeseen. To articulate this possibility we will draw from a vocabulary coined by two at first sight perhaps unrelated thinkers, Giorgio Agamben and Stanley Cavell<sup>4</sup>. In both their philosophies the figure of the child plays a crucial role. With Agamben and Cavell we will describe this scene through the figure of the child and conceive of what happens here as a new beginning. This is not to say, though, that we define education here in terms of the raising of small children: the childhood we see depicted in this scene denotes, we will argue, a general condition for education to take place in children and grown-ups alike.

### **Supporting an unjust world order via films**

As we said, a very common reading of this piece of film is to say that it reinforces structural forms of oppression and injustice, and that all this goes unnoticed because of the kind of enjoyment the audience experiences. This is at least what Michael Rogin (1998) claims. Rehearsing Adorno and Horkheimer’s criticism of popular culture (2002), Rogin draws our attention away from the rapture we feel when Astaire is performing his dance routine to a political dimension that normally escapes our mind. Sitting in front of the screen, being carried away by the rhythms of easily digestible music, we miss the reprehensible nature of this scene: a white man affirming societal and cultural superiority vis-à-vis a black man. What is more, Astaire actually *robs* from the African-American community *their* cultural heritage: after all, popular dance culture, being part of America’s national identity, is partly an appropriation of the traditional and more original black culture.

---

<sup>4</sup> Bringing these two philosophers together is most unusual. Although it is important in its own right to discuss similarities, differences and possible influences on and between these philosophers, we do not have the time to develop this here. On a more anecdotal note, during his stay in the United States, Agamben at one point was a student of Cavell and participated in the seminars Cavell held on Hollywood film at Harvard University (Kishik, 2012, p. 1).

Enjoying this scene, we, as viewers, then actually support systematic forms of societal and cultural domination. Our enjoyment is in fact an affirmation of our own complicity. In view of this the only educational value this scene might have is purely *negative*: educationalists should use it as a ‘bad example’, exposing the hidden racist message behind it, explaining the mechanisms behind structural forms of discrimination, and hence raising critical consciousness, hoping to contribute to the coming into being of a more just society. On the one hand, Rogin’s way of responding to the film scene in question seems very reasonable on educational grounds. Many educationalists are concerned with the possibility of the transformation of existing ways of how we organize and give meaning to the world we commonly inhabit. The very persistence of phenomena such as generational poverty, homophobia or, indeed, racism forms a moral disgrace and needs to be actively addressed. Hence the idea that we are responsible for nurturing appropriate moral sensitivities in children (e.g. by setting the example ourselves) and that we have no choice but to intervene in educational practices and through educational reforms (e.g. obliging schools to have an ethnic mix of pupils). On the other hand, however, an approach like Rogin’s might also lead to what Frank Furedi (2009) has called a far-reaching politicization of education, i.e. a more general tendency in contemporary society to expect that educational institutions contribute to the solution of pressing societal problems. E.g., it has become evident that schools not only sensitize children for issues like obesities, but also that they actively prevent it by offering healthy food and prohibiting sweets and soft drinks. Or, similarly, it has become commonplace that we start at a young age with teaching children that humankind has an enormous ecological responsibility and that imparting to everyone a form of ‘ecological literacy’ will result in a more desirable world.

Furedi doesn’t call into question the best of intentions behind these initiatives, but he warns for a reduction of children’s educability to a mere means for political reform. Following Hannah Arendt on this point, he draws a sharp distinction between education, which always concerns a relation between (unequal) generations, and politics, which concerns a form of action amongst equals. He argues that the elder generation should take upon itself the task of addressing the world’s pressing societal problems instead of delegating these to the new generation and act as if children are already capable of and responsible for political action. We should not confuse politics and education, which have different roles to play<sup>5</sup>. Education, he argues, should be appreciated for what it is: an initiation into an existing world which at the same time leaves the possibility for the new generation to start with this world in new and unforeseen ways. When the elder generation refuses to take upon itself the responsibility for the world education turns into indoctrination. (Furedi, 2009, p. 52)

This might seem an odd idea at first sight, as the initiatives we mentioned are all well-meant and – unmistakably – aim at a new, more desirable world to live in. However, Furedi is bringing forward here, in a more intensified form, an idea by Arendt, when she provocatively suggests that the very idea of educating the new generation for a *new* world contains the seed of totalitarianism (Arendt, 2006, p. 177). Her point is that in this case we do not welcome the new generation as *truly* new, but merely exploit their capacity for newness (which she calls *natality*) for our own benefits – to fulfill our own unfulfilled dreams, so to speak. Instead of allowing the new generation to begin anew with the old world, an education for a new world appropriates natality and eventually destroys it. That is why she

---

<sup>5</sup> It is in that sense that Arendt can say that education has an ‘essence’: education has essentially nothing to do with politics. Or, to draw from Jean-Luc Nancy (2008): the main task of politics (the adults’ task to care for the well-being of the world) is to make sure that not everything is political.

famously states that education should not only protect children from the world, but also protect the world from the children. This means, first, that it is not *their* responsibility to solve the problems of the adult world (and hence it is an act of plain cowardice not to take up our responsibility as adults). Secondly, and more important, it is *only* against the background of an already existing world that the world might be set 'right' again (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 192). Hence education should be conservative (and thus initiate children in an *old* world), for the very sake of keeping open the possibility of its rebirth. Stated differently, only an education that is allowed to be non-political gives an adequate answer to the promise of natality. Education that is properly education is not about progress, but about transformation in the fundamental sense that the future is, in an important sense, without ~~destiny~~destination. (We will come back to this below.)

We share Furedi's and Arendt's concern that the ambition to achieve political goals through education narrows down our conception of education, so that we run the risk of no longer being sensitive to certain moments that don't fit in this logic, but that might also be called educational. It is to this aim that we propose an alternative reading of the 'shoeshine frenzy' scene, a reading which is not concerned with stressing the politically unacceptable side of this scene (which we, obviously, don't want to deny). Rather, we will draw attention to other aspects and clarify how this scene can be defined as an *intrinsically* educational moment – without immediately taking a moralizing perspective and without judging what we see happening in the name of a precise political calling of education. We will do so by setting to work how both Cavell and Agamben understand the figure of the child, in particular the idea that a closer analysis of the way in which a child comes into this world and more precisely has to deal with the laborious task of mastering language is most elucidating for understanding something of the human condition.

In both Agamben's and Cavell's work we find a fascination for the marvel of language acquirement. Typically this is something which is situated in some developmental stage of 'childhood', that is, in a well-defined stage in human development. Against this, we find in Cavell and Agamben a claim that childhood is an everlasting part of the human condition<sup>6</sup>. Agamben and Cavell also demonstrate that it is precisely childhood which allows for educability, i.e. for the possibility of true transformation taking place. To be very clear on this point, we consider the possibility of a new beginning as an ever present modality. Obviously, this idea might be criticized by pointing out the important distinction to be made between educating children (meaning that they first have to become someone *ab*

---

<sup>6</sup> An interesting case, portrayed in the 1974 motion picture by Werner Herzog, is that of Kaspar Hauser, a man who only learned to speak when he was biologically mature (Cf. *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle*, translated in English as *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*). There is no opportunity here to explore this further, but Herzog's superb portrayal of an adult person struggling with language shows something about childhood as a structural dimension of being human in the way we are developing this here. For Kaspar – although being biologically mature – every single word and sentence he says requires effort. It might feel strange, disconcerting perhaps, to see an adult 'struggle' with words and sentences like Kaspar does (at least as portrayed by Herzog). And, hearing the man struggle one feels as if one would like to 'jump in' and complete his words and the sentences he started, like we sometimes do when conversing with children, as if to restore or repair the flow of communication (accustomed as we are to communication being fluent). But the point exactly is what is being brought out by this man struggling with coming into language (or, in a more Cavellian idiom, our quest for intelligibility): it draws our attention to the fact that this struggle is not something that ends when childhood is at its end (whenever that may be), but that it concerns a continuous given of our human existence with language. Or still: childhood remains ever part of adulthood.

ovo) and educating adults (who already possess an established identity and who become someone else). In view of this distinction it does not make sense, so one could point out, to say that *transformation* takes place at the level of childhood. We argue, however, that such a traditionalistic view is limited, because it starts from adulthood and defines childhood as an exceptional state (childhood defined negatively as a state of *not yet* being adult). To us it seems more productive to explore the opposite idea that we all remain children (in a sense to be qualified throughout this article) and that the possibility of transformation at a later age is only made possible precisely because of this structural condition. Educational change in later life is then only one case of a more general potential for transformation.

Moreover, the argument that this term should be reserved for processes of change in adults only is, in our view, based on a limited and merely psychological account of transformation. In this case the criterion that serves to identify this change is located in the private personality an individual child or adult possesses. And so, because children cannot have such a personality yet, it follows by definition that the term transformation is not applicable to them. However, we allude in this article to a more profound sense of this expression and use it to refer to the idea that our individual and communal lives are not governed by necessity, and that a new begin is always possible. Thus, the category transformation doesn't apply first and foremost to psychological features, but to a dimension that transcends the level of the individual, viz. the common world we live in. In relation to the possibility of a renewal of this world adults and children are alike – or more accurately put: they share the same childhood.

#### **Cavell, Agamben and the figure of the child: On language and beginning anew**

When we think of (or witness) children acquiring language, it is hard to miss that this is a process of hit and miss, a struggle to find the 'right' words. One can think here, especially, of those instances in which children become angry at grown-ups for not having understood what they wanted to say. Cavell draws our attention to how important it is that we respond in certain ways to a child when she produces sounds and also to how much we assume about what a child 'means' when uttering these sounds. In particular, he shows that we should not assume too much, neither about the teaching of language or about the learning of it (Cavell, 1979). In an *Excursus on Wittgenstein's vision of language* (in his *The claim of reason*) he gives an example of his daughter who, learning the meaning of the word 'kitty' and having 'correctly' used it a number of times, at some day suddenly "smiled at a fur piece, stroked it, and said 'kitty'" (Ibid., p. 172). Asking further questions about what he thought his daughter knew, what she could have meant, what "the syntax of that performance [could] be transcribed as" (Ibid.), etc., Cavell, instead of bringing this to the conclusion of a radical skepticism about the possibility of communication, points out the importance of the learning of the meaning of words here by using the metaphor of taking leaps: "If she had never made such leaps she would never have walked into speech. Having made it, meadows of communication can grow for us. Where you can leap to depends on where you stand." (Ibid.).

It is important that Cavell speaks of making a leap and not, e.g., of taking a step. When taking a step, one always has one foot on the ground, the suggestion being that there always is a foothold, without the risk of losing one's feet. Taking a step as allegorical of the process of acquiring a language would imply that there is a good deal of certainty about the meaning of the words we use. But making a leap implies a sense of radicalness in at least two ways: first, making a leap is initiating a disconnection from the ground, it is a letting go of one's foothold (even if only temporarily). Second, and perhaps even

more radically, it is not just that there is no connection anymore (between feet and ground, between pieces of ground), the suggestion in 'making a leap' is also that it is not clear where exactly one will be landing and, even, if there will be a (safe) landing at all. The important point to grasp here, we argue, is that making a leap, as allegorical of the process of acquiring language, is indicating that the attempt to speak does not entail its own guarantee of success: one is never sure whether or not something will come about, whether or not what one says makes sense to the other, appeals to the other. When leaping, one may fall and hurt oneself; successful self-expression or self-realization is never guaranteed.

This is connected to the idea that the meaning of words is inherently ambiguous and that language is never a private affair. The meanings of the words we use are never fixed and can be contested at any moment. In the same excursus in which he deals with the example of his daughter 'leaping' into language, Cavell wonders "why haven't we arranged to *limit* words to *certain* contexts, and then coin new ones for new eventualities?" (Ibid., p. 180). This is, Cavell argues, not a mere accidental characteristic of the languages we speak – and an annoying problem that ideally should be overcome one day. On the contrary, it is the polysemic character of ordinary language, "the fierce ambiguity of ordinary language", Cavell says (ibid.), which implies that we can only speak or make sense if we are willing to negotiate about the meaning of the words we use. Decisions have to be made whether or not a term may be used appropriately in a given (new) situation: can one really be said to 'learn' facts about history by checking Wikipedia? Can one become a true 'friend' through contacts on Facebook? Can two people of the same sex be 'married'? Etc. The point being that we either agree or we do not. Language leaves us no choice but to negotiate about the terms 'we' use. In a sense it is language which forces to make communal decisions and as such a 'we' is created in the first place.

It is thus always a 'we' that speaks, there is always a community which transcends one's own private existence. But rather than seeing this in negative terms (that we can never be sure and therefore never can really speak with one another because of the lack of complete understanding), we argue that it is in fact a positive reading of this event that Cavell is bringing out. Making a leap indicates the sense that with every word we utter, a new beginning is made – i.e. leaving 'old', established meanings behind (even if only momentarily), seeking other ones. The idea that children constantly have to try out whether or not the words they can use are appropriate or not – and this against the background of words having no fixed meaning – is a condition of *freedom*: not in the negative sense that they are *freed from* something that hinders their full self-expression or self-realization, but in the positive sense of experiencing language without any clear direction or destination. It is this positive sense of freedom Cavell hints at when speaking of "meadows of communication" (Ibid., p. 172). The use of "meadow" entails the suggestion of openness and it possibly also evokes a sense of joy and freshness. A meadow, characteristically, does not offer a definite sense of direction; the one walking into a meadow is necessitated to find her own direction and destination.

But Cavell is not just pointing to the condition children find themselves in; the stronger point he is making is that one *always* has to make leaps, that one *always is* making leaps when speaking, that this is a condition for children *and* adults. As 'grown-ups', that is: as someone claiming to be master of a language, we cannot claim authority over the meaning of words; these meanings have to be 'reinvented' (negotiated) permanently (Ibid., p. 180). We remain 'children' throughout the whole of our lives. The difficulty however is that we don't tend to acknowledge this. Once we have attained adulthood and consider ourselves able to use language fluently, we tend to ~~forget-forget~~ about the struggle acquiring

language is. It is in this sense perhaps telling to see that mostly we seem to want to move quickly to the stage of 'fluent communication', to leave behind, as soon as possible, that stage of not being able to 'communicate properly'. Moreover, it is not only so that we tend to forget our own first attempts to master language, we also, importantly, tend to define early childhood negatively as a period of lack: the child is not yet able to speak, and this is a situation which should be overcome, by a process we usually call education.

Agamben (1993) is evoking a similar condition (and problem) when using the expression *infantia*. Though this is the Latin word for 'childhood', it literally refers to the state of not being able to speak (infans). Agamben takes *infantia* as a condition which does not refer to childhood as a developmental stage, but to the fact that every act of speech is a struggle and the possibility of a new beginning. *Infantia* is not a stage anterior to or outside of language, but is something that is given *with* language as such. It refers to the fact that the normality of our faculty of speech is constantly in danger of being exposed by the given that we, in contradistinction to the animals, don't *have* or *possess* a language. In both Agamben and Cavell we find the idea that as adults we erroneously believe that we actually *have* a language. Another way of putting this is by saying that as adults we tend to regard language as a mere instrument for communication, a means that we might perfectly control one day. However, Cavell and Agamben take a different perspective: language remains forever at a distance (we can never fully interiorize it) and it is this lack which defines who we are as human beings. Cavell expresses this by saying that language is a bequest (Cavell, 1979, p. 189). In Agamben this reads: "Contrary to ancient traditional beliefs [...] man [sic] is not the 'animal possessing language', but instead the animal deprived of language and obliged, therefore, to receive it from outside himself" (Agamben, 1993, p. 65). He challenges the traditional way of opposing humankind and animality on the basis of having versus not-having language, viz. the idea that animals *only* have the capacity to express desire, satisfaction or pain (*phonè*) whilst humankind is the sole living being gifted with speech (*zoon logon echon*). Agamben argues that we should see things the other way around: animals completely coincide with the 'sign system' they use (and in that sense truly *have* a language), whilst human beings always first have to learn to master a language without ever fully gaining mastery. For Agamben, humans don't 'have' a language; instead, language is something they always, time and again, need to acquire.

Stated otherwise, it is precisely because we always have to appropriate language that we become who we are. Referring once more to the difference between animal and human language, Agamben brings under attention Benveniste's 'discovery' that whereas both humans and animals are both language-users, *only* human beings use a language containing personal pronouns (Ibid., p. 53). As such, "it is in and through language that the individual is constituted as a subject. Subjectivity is nothing other than the speaker's capacity to posit him or herself as an *ego*, and cannot in any way be defined through some wordless sense of being oneself, nor by deferral to some ineffable psychic experience of the *ego*, but only through a linguistic I transcending any possible experience." (Ibid., p. 52) There is no subjectivity that precedes language. Rather language precedes subject-constitution, and this formation of subjectivity is the result of a process of acquiring a language. As we said before, speaking language is never a private affair.

Whereas for Cavell this condition becomes manifest in the inevitability of the negotiated nature of the meaning of words, Agamben argues that we may become aware of this condition when we experience the materiality of language – an experience he refers to with the expression *experimentum*

*linguae* (Ibid., p. 5). By this he means the ever-present possibility that the words we use entirely lose their meaning and become just material objects (spoken or written sounds) that *could* refer to something, but, for a moment, stop signifying the world. (One can think here of little children repeating over and over again the same word until it becomes an empty signifier.) This experience, importantly, is not meant to denote a return to a situation anterior to language, i.e. some kind of edenic realm that precedes any linguistic or symbolic imposition and constraint and in which true fulfilment may be encountered. Rather, *experimentum linguae* is an experience we only have *as* speakers of language. We are still speaking language, but relate to language in a way out of the ordinary: language is being set free. However, the freedom experienced here is not a matter of regaining a more authentic state (being free *from*), but all the more a matter of finding oneself without any destination whatsoever (and thus, positively spoken, being free *for*). Furthermore, it concerns an ‘experiment’ in the original sense of the Latin verb ‘*experiri*’, meaning ‘to seek out danger’, to put oneself at risk, to lose oneself. It is thus an existential event. It has nothing to do with the acknowledgment of a theoretical insight into the contingent nature of language (realizing that the words we use are merely arbitrary signs), but is meant as something one has to live through. And the result of the experiment may be that things change, or, as put above: that a new beginning is possible. Finally, although *experimentum linguae* might be negatively defined as an event that renders us impotent (as we are no longer able to convey what we want to say and to realize ourselves through speech), it might also relate to experiencing something that philosophers have tried to articulate since the very dawning of western civilization (mostly in terms of the ‘ineffable’, i.e. the unsayable, a transcendental ground that cannot be articulated), viz. that we are creatures of possibility rather than of necessity. When we use speech in a ‘normal’ way we never experience this, because then we only experience that we can say ‘some-thing’. But that we *can* say this or that, is not experienced. It is only when being momentarily deprived of the possibility of actualizing the power for speech in concrete utterances that we might fully experience to be creatures capable of uttering meaningful speech (Agamben, 1993, pp. 177-184).

### **Leaping and interruption: The educational (and political) in Astaire’s performance**

What in Agamben is described as the experience of the materiality of language and what in Cavell is brought out as the realization that every speaker of a language has to ‘make leaps’ are, we want to argue, experiences that should properly be called *educational* for the very reason that they entail the promise of genuine change. Here we bring to mind again Arendt’s view on education as opening the possibility of a transformation of the existing world, the coming into being of true ‘newness’. Of course, this definition is at odds with the account that is dominant today and that regards education first of all as an inclusion of the new generation in an already established societal order (even when, as we explained in the second part of this text, this societal order sees itself as ‘progressive’ out of the best of intentions). Education is then defined as a matter of continuing something that is already given: we acquire knowledge and skills in order to strengthen ourselves and to realize our life-plans. In adult life, for something like this, we have come to use concepts such as ‘life-long learning’ – and the self is being conceived here as a kind of portfolio that we can complete or enrich at will. The process at work here is merely one of growth, as in ‘becoming larger’ (cf. Stiegler, 2010, p. 43). We claim, however, that this dominant view correlates with the same short-sightedness which makes it difficult for adult speakers to realize that they are *infants* too. As we explained, it is difficult to sustain that every word uttered is

potentially a struggle with language and a new beginning, because we like to believe that we actually possess full mastery over the language we speak. Nevertheless, this view limits education to a mere continuous process. Education, however, can also be seen above all as a matter of *interruption*. This is related to the idea that there is no necessity in any given ordering of communal life and that everything might begin anew.

It is in fact this sense of 'educational' that we see enacted in Astaire's shoeshine frenzy. Returning once more to Michael Rogin's reading of this scene, the educational moment we draw attention to is *not* the moment of negative critique. We are not interested in revealing something *about* the scene, pointing out its symbolism and exposing its underlying, 'real' meaning (viz. that by behaving in the way he does Astaire shamelessly reaffirms his superior societal position as a white person). Rather, we argue that the educational moment, is to be situated *in* what is happening in the scene itself. Astaire, both in dance and song, concretely shows a moment of interruption and of potential transformation. In other words, his performance is a performance of the structural moment of childhood.

In the scene this is clearest at the point where Astaire's words get so caught up in a rhythmical frenzy that he seems to be overpowered by these words, incessantly repeating the words "shoe shine" (Cavell, 2005, p. 75). As with the child making leaps in order to acquire language, or as in Agamben's child repeating the same word over and over again, Astaire is losing the ground beneath his feet, losing control over the meaning of these words. The experience he is going through is one of, simultaneously, *loss* of the ability for normal speech (he can't speak any longer in a meaningful way, he can only struggle and stumble, just like someone taken by a fit of laughter is temporarily unable to express herself or convey any meaning to make any sense) and of *struggle* to recover, reinvent even, the meaning of these words (trying to make sense to himself and others). Astaire is, as Cavell puts this, "asking what his words mean, when he cannot just not know what they mean. He is reacquiring language [...], reconsidering all his words, as if testing their treachery, pivoting around 'shine'" (Ibid.). In a very literal sense, what we see happening here is an *experimentum linguae* in its pure and, importantly, positively understood form: as an experience of potentiality. The repetition of words up to the point where they start losing meaning also grants that one experiences what it means that one *can* speak, that one experiences oneself as a creature of possibility.

Up till now we have been developing our ideas about a structural childhood from the perspective of the exteriority of a language we never possess. However, the *Band Wagon* scene underlines that infancy isn't a matter of language alone. There is a bodily dimension present here as well, which we want to draw attention to. Quite similar to the experience with the words "shoe shine", Astaire's feet seem to take over. He gives himself over to a flow of dance-steps that seems to steer him rather than vice versa and that puts an end to any possibility of self-command. At the same time, this allows him to experience the very ability to move. Importantly, this doesn't refer to the various movement activities we obviously have mastered (i.e. that we can walk, run, jump, etc.). Rather, it refers to something that is always presupposed in any move we make but which is normally not experienced as such: that we *can* move. It is, thus, an affirmation of our potentiality for movement. Expanding here Agamben's 'experiential' vocabulary, Astaire's agitated dance might be said to be an *experimentum corporis* (Cf. Vlieghe, 2013). In fact, both experiments seem to be inextricably linked to one another; they are two sides of one and the same coin. Astaire's frenzy is at once verbal and bodily. Perhaps we could even say that it is *because* we are bodily creatures, i.e. capable of speech and movement, that an interruption of an established order

and of a true new beginning is made possible. It is as speaking and moving bodies that we may experience a loss of self which is simultaneously the opening towards new possibilities.

In sum, Astaire's shoeshine frenzy deserves our attention because it is a show of childhood (*infantia*). Instead of pointing to the symbolic staging of unjust *power* relations, the educational relevance lies in its moment of *disempowerment*. What occurs in the scene is a temporary suspension of any definite meaning one's words or movements may have. They are 'without destination'. And this is not an experience reserved for children, but a possibility which is continuously present in every human being capable of movement and speech. The importance of this structural childhood is that it turns us, permanently, into educable beings (Agamben, 1993, pp. 64-67). Rather than reinforcing an existing order of society, as Rogin argues, Astaire's dance performance may thus precisely be (seen as) one of interrupting this order. It is, thus, a moment of neutralizing societal power. There is no necessity whatsoever in the way we order and structure our lives, individually and collectively. Everything can be different and a new beginning is always possible.

But, one could ask: "educational for whom?" And furthermore: "And to what end?"<sup>7</sup> For, clearly, not much seems to have happened. "The fact is," Cavell says, "that we are left with the black man on his knees" (as can be watched in the scene we refer to) (Cavell, 2005, p. 80). Granted, a suspension of power structures is not synonymous with an actual reform of these structures. Moreover we do not suggest that it leads in and of itself to a change in societal conditions. But, suspension here precisely means that existence is experienced in such a way that whatever differences in position and identity society impose, this just does not make sense: life is experienced in such a way that it is, at least momentarily, not susceptible for any ordering according to societal categories. In that sense what happens here is also not correctly analyzed as a *negation* of societal ordering: it concerns a moment *beyond* societal power, in the sense that Nietzsche (a source of inspiration to both Cavell and Agamben) used the expression "beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche, 1973), not to promote an immoral life, but a stance towards life that is powerful enough not to be guided by neither good nor evil.

The new beginning this scene might entail is not found, then, at the level of the concrete societal structures themselves, but concerns a transformation in the attitude we take towards the world we live in. In this sense, the scene does show something of great importance. As a moment of interruption, the scene reveals itself as an event in which "these two men can dance together – for a while – on an equal basis, equally choreographed, equally standing, equally kneeling, equally happy with the knowledge of their achievement in their joint work, a momentary achievement of the Kingdom of Ends,<sup>8</sup> a traumatic glimpse of utopia" (Ibid., p. 78).

---

<sup>7</sup> Although we certainly think it is necessary to explore this issue further, we have no opportunity here to expand on the way in which the use of film can contribute to the development of educational theory. We limit ourselves to an analysis of a space of experience opened by a particular piece of film and try to argue why this can be properly called educational. We will deal with the educational role of using film at another opportunity, which will also allow us to articulate more concretely the implications our ideas might have for pedagogical action and ethics, as well as for rethinking the intergenerational difference (which is after all the cornerstone of traditional accounts of education).

<sup>8</sup> The expression 'Kingdom of Ends' is of course a Kantian expression. Cavell's analysis of Astaire's dance performance is part of a larger discussion, viz. whether or not Hollywood drama deserves to be 'praised'. It is against this background that Cavell refers to Kant's philosophy of art, and more specifically to Kant's problematic definition of aesthetic judgment in terms of a purely sensuous and thus an a-moral form of gratification.

But also for the one witnessing the scene it can be educational. Astaire has done everything that lies within his powers to do (Ibid., p. 79), which is: addressing the issue by dancing. But precisely in doing so, he has opened a world for someone else without claiming the meaning of that world. In this sense, his “frenzy” can be seen as an invitation for someone else to further take up the issue. In Arendt’s sense, Astaire’s dance is an educational gesture because it doesn’t dictate how the world should look like. Astaire cannot, Cavell says, “preserve” the realm he has glimpsed (Ibid.). Rather, he liberates, opens up, or ‘unlocks’; and it is up to his audience, whether or not to preserve that realm and in what ways.

And perhaps because of this ‘minimal’ gesture, the scene may have a political meaning as well – and one that meets Furedi’s and Arendt’s criticism of policy reforms that reduce education to an instrument for societal reform (and thus actually neutralize any potential for newness). The very moments that are called educational and which interrupt (rather than continue) a given ordering of societal life, might also be political – political understood here as a dimension of human life which transcends the individual level and which involves the individual in something larger: the life of the society or culture s/he belongs to. Or, as Cavell remarks near the end of his discussion of this scene: “If I am to possess my own experience I cannot afford to cede it to my culture as that culture stands. I must find ways to insist upon it, if I find it unheard, ways to let the culture confront itself in me, driving me some distance to distraction.” (Ibid., p. 82) The experience of the possibility that everything can begin anew is simultaneously also a call to take seriously the idea that we *should* bother about the quality of ‘our’ communal world. The strong experience that one *can* speak or that one *can* dance is indeed never a private affair. In that sense the truly educational has in and of itself also political implications.

## References

Adorno, Theodor & Horkheimer, Max. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *Infancy and History*. Translated by Liz Heron. London: Verso.

Arendt, Hannah. 2006. “The Crisis in Education”, in *Between Past and Future. Five Essays in Political Thought*. London: Penguin Books.

Cavell, Stanley. 2005. *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press.

Cavell, Stanley. 1979. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality and tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Furedi, Frank. 2009. *Wasted. Why Education Isn’t Educating*. London: Continuum.

Gooding-Williams, Robert. 2006. Aesthetics and Receptivity : Kant, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Astaire. Chap. 12 in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kishik, David. 2012. *The Power of Life. Agamben and the Coming Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2008. *The sense of the world*. Translated by Jeffrey S. Librett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rogin, Michael. 1998. *Black Face and White Noise. Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. Berkeley: University of California.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. ~~1073~~ 1973 (1886). *Beyond Good and Evil. A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books.

Standish, Paul. ~~2010~~ 2014. "Criticism and Praise in the Terms of the Arcade." *Philosophy of Education*, 2014 (In Press).

Stiegler, Bernard. 2010. *Taking care of youth and the generations*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Vlieghe, Joris. 2013. "Physical education beyond sportification and biopolitics. An untimely defense of Swedish gymnastics." *Sport, Education and Society* 18 (3): 277-291. doi: 10.1080/13573322.2011.566602.