

The Show of Childhood: Agamben and Cavell on Education and Transformation

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We begin with a scene taken from a 1950s musical.¹ Fred Astaire, playing an aging musical star in search for a second career, enters a shopping mall, called “Arcade.” He stumbles over the feet of a shoeshine “boy,” a black adult person who is portrayed in a very stereotypical way: shabby, goofy, and clumsy. 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 drags along the shoeshine boy in a shared dance. When their dance is over the black servant is sitting on his knees again, left to stay in the Arcade, whilst the star of the movie, still standing upright, leaves the Arcade, brightly smiling.

In this essay, we will defend that this scene, taken from Vincente Minnelli’s film *The Band Wagon* (1953), 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,² which we will develop further here in dialogue with another philosopher, Giorgio Agamben.³ The ideas we develop go against the grain of much educational thought on this kind of outright western-centered and racist cinema. Nonetheless, 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 (temporary) liberation from existing power structures. 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.

SUPPORTING AN UNJUST WORLD ORDER VIA FILM

A very common reading of this piece of film is 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 claims.⁴ Rehearsing Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's criticism of popular culture,⁵ 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.

Enjoying this scene, we, as viewers, 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 (for example, by setting the example ourselves) and that we have no choice but to intervene in educational practices.

On the other hand, however, an approach like Rogin's might also lead to what Frank Furedi has called a far-reaching politicization of education,⁶ that is, a more general tendency in contemporary society to expect that educational institutions contribute to the solution of pressing societal problems. For example, 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 teaching children at a young age 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. 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.⁷

Though less radically than Furedi, we share the 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 that 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 — a figure that plays an important role in the work of both philosophers. They both share 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 essence, for both philosophers childhood isn't merely a well-defined stage in human development, but an everlasting part of the human condition.

CAVELL, AGAMBEN, AND THE FIGURE OF THE CHILD: 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 with 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.⁸ 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.'"⁹ Asking further questions about what he thought his daughter knew and what she could have meant, Cavell, instead of bringing this to the conclusion of a radical skepticism about the possibility of communication, points out here the importance of learning the meaning of words 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."¹⁰

It is important that Cavell speaks of making a leap and not of taking a step. When taking a step, one always has one foot on the ground, suggesting 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 something radically different: first, making a leap is initiating a disconnection from the ground, a letting go of one's foothold. Second, it is not just that there is no connection anymore (between feet and 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 is that making a leap is indicating that the attempt to speak does not entail its own guarantee of success: one cannot foresee whether or not something will come about, or what one says makes sense to the other. When leaping, one may fall and hurt oneself.

This is connected to the idea that words are 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. This is because a community of speakers, through negotiations, always has to decide whether or not it is appropriate to use a certain expression in a given situation. It is always a "we" that speaks; there is always a community that transcends one's own private existence. But rather than seeing this in negative terms ("we can never be sure"), we argue that Cavell is in fact bringing out a positive reading of this event. Making a leap indicates the sense that with every word we utter, a new beginning is made — that is, 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." The use of "meadow" entails the suggestion of openness and 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.¹¹ 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 about the struggle involved in acquiring 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 situation should be overcome.

Agamben is evoking a similar condition (and problem) when using the expression *infantia*.¹² Though this is the Latin word for "childhood," it literally refers to the state of not being able to speak (in-fans). Agamben takes *infantia* as a condition that 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 that defines who we are as human beings. Cavell expresses this by saying that language is a bequest.¹³ 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."¹⁴ He challenges the traditional way of opposing humankind and animality on the basis of having versus not-having language, namely, 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.

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*.¹⁵ 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, but is an experience we have *as* speakers *of* language, that is, as language being set free (in the sense indicated earlier: without destination). Furthermore, it is an "experiment" in its original Latin sense "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, but is meant as something one has to live through. And the result of the experiment may be that things change, or, as previously stated: 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 "ineffabile," that is, the unsayable, a transcendental ground that cannot be articulated), namely, that we are creatures of

possibility rather than of necessity. When we use speech in a “normal” way we never experience this, because we 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.¹⁶

LEAPING INTO SELF-LOSS: THE EDUCATIONAL (AND POLITICAL) IN
ASTAIRE’S DANCE ROUTINE

What in Agamben is described as the experience of infancy 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 transformation or change. Drawing on Arendt, we see education as something that (also) opens the possibility of a transformation of the existing world, instead of (only) enabling the inclusion of the new generation in an already established societal order (even when this societal order, out of the best of intentions, sees itself as “progressive”).¹⁷ We share with Arendt the conviction (or hope) 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. The scene’s educational moment we draw attention to is not the moment of negative critique — revealing something *about* the scene, pointing out its symbolism and exposing its underlying, “real” meaning (namely, that by behaving in the way he does Astaire shamelessly reaffirms his superior societal position as a white person). The educational moment, we argue, is to be situated *in* what is happening in the scene itself. Astaire, both in dance and song, concretely shows the moment of interruption and of potential transformation. 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” (*PDT*, 75). As with the child making leaps in order to acquire language, 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 is no longer speaking in an ordinary meaningful way) 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 it, “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’” (*PDT*, 75). 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.

This dialectic between a sense of loss (of meaning, of control) and a struggle (to recover meaning, to make sense) is also underlined by Astaire’s dance routine itself. 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 seem to steer him

rather than vice versa and that put 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 (that is, that we can walk, run, dance, and so forth). 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*.¹⁸

Astaire's shoeshine frenzy deserves our attention because it is, in sum, 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 that 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.¹⁹ Rather than reinforcing an existing order of society, as Rogin argues, Astaire's dance routine 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, to what end? For, clearly, not much seems to have happened. "The fact is," Cavell says, "that we are left with the black man on his knees" (*PDT*, 80). Granted, a suspension of power structures isn't synonymous with an actual reform of these structures. Moreover, we don't 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 imposes just don't make sense: life is experienced in such a way that it is, at least momentarily, not susceptible for any ordering according to societal categories. 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 toward 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 man 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, a traumatic glimpse of utopia" (*PDT*, 78).

But also for the one witnessing the scene it can be, educational. Astaire has done everything that lies within his powers to do (*PDT*, 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 what the world

should look like.²⁰ Astaire cannot, Cavell says, “preserve” the realm he has glimpsed (*PDT*, 79). Rather, he liberates, opens up, or “unlocks”; and it is up to his audience to decide 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 criticism of contemporary policy reforms that reduce education to an instrument for societal reform (and thus actually neutralize any potential for newness).²¹ 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 she or he belongs to. 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” (*PDT*, 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 also has in and of itself political implications.

1. See “Fred Astaire — Recreation Center (from the movie *The Band Wagon*, 1953) — In its purest,” YouTube video, 5:32, posted by “PityYou007,” February 6, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4UUkui545I>. The reader is kindly invited to first watch the scene.

2. Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2005). This work will be cited as *PDT* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. 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 don’t have the time to develop this here.

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

5. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

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

7. *Ibid.*, 52. See also Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Essays in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

8. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 171.

9. *Ibid.*, 172.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 180.

12. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993).

13. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 189.

14. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 65.

15. *Ibid.*, 5.

16. *Ibid.*, 177–84.

17. Arendt, "The Crisis in Education."
18. Joris Vlieghe, "Physical Education Beyond Sportification and Biopolitics: An Untimely Defense of Swedish Gymnastics," *Sport, Education and Society* 18, no. 3 (2013): 277–91.
19. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 64–67.
20. Arendt, "The Crisis in Education."
21. Furedi, *Wasted*.