

Inciting an attentive experimental ethos and creating a laboratory setting¹

Philosophy of education and the transformation of educational institutions

Abstract: All over Europe educational institutions (school, family, university, youth care etc.) are undergoing profound transformations. This paper explores on a more general level of what it could mean to deal with them, to relate to them, and to take up the challenge they offer for philosophy of education. In order to do so, the paper first recalls how Hannah Arendt in the preface to her book *Between Past and Future* entitled "The gap between past and future", describes her own philosophical work as "exercises in/of thought" implying a particular gesture and stance in relation to what happens. To further indicate what such exercises entail (what they actually are about) and what they require (in terms of equipment and preparation) a concrete and topical example of such an exercise is presented: the cinema of the Belgian Dardenne Brothers. Then, finally, these exercises are related to a proposal to create "laboratories", to set up experiments, and to do a kind of 'fieldwork' in relation to the actual transformations of educational institutions.

1. Introduction

All over Europe educational institutions (school, family, university, youth care etc.) are undergoing profound transformations. These are related to particular national and European policies (e.g. the Bologna process or the European Qualification Framework), but also to changing social conditions, to the changing role and availability of knowledge, to increasing migration, to the role of media, and to the revolutions in technology (ICT) and science (e.g. neurosciences, life and learning sciences, ...). I do not want to discuss these transformations here in a direct way. Rather, what interests me is an exploration on a more general level of what it could mean to deal with them, to relate to them, and to take up the challenge they offer for philosophy of education.

A common way of relating to these transformations, which finds its roots in a long-standing critical tradition, conceives of the practice of philosophy (of education) as a kind of (supplementary) inquiry, which tries to understand, judge, and criticize the coherence, the values, the observations, the knowledge claims, the rationality, the aims, the principles, reasons, and arguments that are present in the discourses and practices

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that these transformations entail.² This critical tradition conceives of the work of philosophy primarily as a work of judgment, ordering, justification, selection, concept clarification, interpretation, or explication, which is "critical" in the sense that it is in one way or another oriented towards validity claims (either ethical/normative or epistemological). This means that it *puts reality* (e.g. educational research and theory, educational policies and practices) *to the test* of its own thinking (theory, concepts, knowledge): the test of argumentative logic, of interpretative procedures/criteria, of norms or principles (e.g. of theoretical, practical, communicative reason), of theoretical systems or philosophies (either deductively or analytically constructed). Therefore its utterances and writings, its "truth-telling", claims a critical-judgmental role for (educational) researchers and scholars, which rests on taking a distance and detaching oneself from the reality under scrutiny, a reality that is first of all regarded and experienced as *an object of knowledge*. Consequently, its truth-telling aspires to be either a demonstration (teaching something), or a judgment (separating between valid/not-valid; right/wrong, etc.), or a de-mystification (revealing what is underlying or supposed i.e. denouncing illusions). In a certain way, its writings and utterances are disciplined and given in an "addressed" language: defining the public that lacks enlightenment, that is, the appropriate knowledge (or the appropriate awareness, criteria, virtues...) (Walser, 2000, p. 135).

This critical tradition is an important one and clearly it has a role to play in dealing with the actual transformations. However, I would like to pay attention to another, admittedly more marginal, tradition in philosophy, which we can call the *ascetic* (or existentially-oriented) tradition, which understands critique not in terms of judgment, but in terms of an experiment and an exposition.³ In this tradition, the work of philosophy is in the first place a work on the self i.e. *putting oneself to the "test of contemporary reality"*, implying an enlightenment not of others but of one-self, but of one-self not as subject of knowledge but as *subject of action*.⁴ This putting one-self to test is, therefore, an exercise in the context of self-formation and self-education: it seeks to transform or modify one's own mode of being and how one lives in the present. This transformation is, then, the condition for insight and knowledge (Foucault, 1984/2007, p. 114). This exercise implies not so much a judgmental ethos and a critical distance, but rather an "intimate" relationship and nearness related to an attentive and experimental ethos. In my

² For some clear examples see a recent Special Issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* entitled "What do philosophers of education do? (And how do they do it?)" (Ruitenberg, 2009). We can find equivalent and similar formulations in the German and French contexts.

³ See Foucault (1984): "But if we are not to settle for the affirmation or the empty dream of freedom, it seems to me that this historico-critical attitude must also be an experimental one. I mean that this work done at the limits of ourselves must... put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take" (p. 47).

⁴ In this tradition Wittgenstein (1980) wrote: "Work in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one asks of it)" (p. 16). And Foucault (1986) famously called "philosophy" "an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought" (p. 9). On Foucault see: McGushin (2007).

contribution I want to further specify this ethos by trying to articulate more clearly the relation to contemporary reality and the kind of activities it implies. In order to do this, I will (1) recall how Hannah Arendt in the preface to her book *Between Past and Future* entitled “The gap between past and future”, describes her own philosophical work as “exercises in/of thought” implying a particular gesture and stance in relation to what happens. To further indicate what such exercises entail (what they actually are about) and what they require (in terms of equipment and preparation) I will (2) present a concrete and topical example of such an exercise. Then, finally, (3) I will briefly relate these exercises to a proposal to create “laboratories”, to set up experiments, and to do a kind of ‘fieldwork’ in relation to the actual transformations of educational institutions.

2. Hannah Arendt: putting oneself to the test of contemporary reality, or an “exercise in/of thought”

Arendt (1968) considers the work she offers in *Between Past and Future* to be “exercises in thought”, containing criticism but being mainly “experiments” “arising out of the actuality of incidents”, and having the form of “essays”. Most interesting to consider here is how she elaborates on the space/time of these exercises, and states that the “proper region of thought” is not the region that “Western metaphysics has dreamed [of] from Parmenides to Hegel”: a “timeless, spaceless, suprasensuous realm” (p. 11). It is, rather, what she calls the gap between past and future. But this gap, another name for the present, as “an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet” (p. 9), “is not the present as we usually understand it”, as a point in a continuous “flow of uninterrupted succession” (p. 11) or in a “stream of sheer change – which we can conceive of cyclically as well as in the form of rectilinear motion” (Arendt, 1978, p. 203). Rather it is the present “due exclusively to the presence of man” (Arendt, 1968, p. 10) i.e. the insertion into time of “a beginning” (man as acting being). The exercises of thought are concerned with the present, but the present is not what appears as such and before us (as an *object of knowledge*). Rather, it is what is experienced when we are attentive, when we are “present in the present” (attending to the present, touched by it and touching it – where the relation between object-subject of knowledge is suspended), when “we” are “there” i.e. we insert ourselves and thus also expose ourselves to what is happening. That is to say that the present, as the gap where these exercises take place, exists only in so far as man recognizes or experiences him/herself as *a beginner*, as a subject of action, inserts him/herself in time, “splitting up time in *forces* that work upon him/her” (p. 11; italics J. M.), but that are, thus, in a way broken or interrupted in him/her (as beginning – where s/he stands).

So, the space/time of the exercise of thought – a space/time that is distinct from the “ever-changing time-space which is created and limited by the *forces* of past and future” (Arendt, 1968, p. 12; italics J. M.) – is the gap or present that “come[s] into being only with his own, self-inserting appearance” (p. 12). The gap only exists when one is oneself there, being attentive to the present, taking care of it, being concerned with it (which is

not the same as knowing it). This means that the “exercise of thought” (i.e. philosophy in this sense) is an exercise that is not oriented towards (or based on, or about) knowledge in the first place, but concerns the issue of how to act and relate to the present, whereby “only insofar [as] he thinks... does man in the *full actuality of his concrete being* live in this gap of time between past and future” (p. 13; italics J. M.). In that sense the exercise of thought is not a jumping out of that present, but on the contrary “remains bound to and is rooted in the present” (p. 12). Although Arendt claims that the one who thinks is ageless (not part of – i.e. in no way determined by – a history or a biography),⁵ the time of thinking is not the time where one has jumped out of human affairs and is “above the *melée*” (p. 12). It is no “timeless, spaceless, suprasensuous realm” (p. 11). It is precisely the present that is the gap, and the way to live in this gap is thinking. Or better, thinking is an activity immediately related to an existential question of how to live in the present (Arendt writes that it is about “how to move in the gap”, p. 14). It has to do with myself as a subject of (right) action i.e. a subject that takes care of the present and of one’s presence in that present. The “exercise of thought” (which cannot be learned, according to Arendt, but has to be performed time and again) is a work on oneself not in the first place as a subject of knowledge (knowledge is important but in relation to the care for the self), but as one who experiences oneself as a beginner – somebody who is “able to” act and speak, and to use the words of Jacques Rancière (2009), someone who does not forget herself – “*se souvient de soi*” – suspending historical time (and historical necessity), suspending biographical time (and psychological necessity), suspending social time (and sociological necessity) – i.e. ageless, as Arendt says, but at the same time attached to the present, present in the present. Therefore thinking means: not to forget oneself. Not to forget oneself as subject of action, as being an insertion in time, a beginning through which the (historical, psychological, social...) forces work.

According to Arendt (1968), the gap between past and future (which has existed since the presence of ‘men’) was previously bridged by tradition. But now tradition is lost and no longer throws light on the future. There is still a past and even a heritage, but without testament, without any authoritative or directive force, it is no longer operative as tradition but has become instead an available resource. The present, then, has become “a tangible reality and perplexity for all” (p. 14) urging for exercises of thought to see “how to move in this gap” (p. 14). But it has also solicited all kinds of strategies to close the gap, to ignore it, to avoid thinking as exposing oneself to the present, i.e. strategies to immunize oneself against the fact that after tradition has been lost, one has to take up the challenge to live a truly “human” life and to try the words (authority, freedom, education,...) and verbs (living, loving, speaking,...) again. If we refuse to expose ourselves to the present, being, as Arendt says, a battlefield of forces, rather than a home (p. 13) and to recognize ourselves as acting, then there remains only the experience of

5 She states that in historical and biographical time there are no gaps: “Applied to historical or biographical time, none of these metaphors can possibly make sense because gaps do not occur there” (Arendt, 1968, p. 13). That the one who thinks is ageless does not mean that s/he has no past or future but that, in thinking, these forces are suspended i.e. they are not absent but temporarily prevented from being in force or effect.

“sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it” – things taking their course⁶ and us only trying to protect or to adapt ourselves.

In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt (1955) writes: “What begins now, after the end of world history, is the history of mankind” (p. 90). And she writes at the end of her essay “What is Authority?” (and repeats at the end of “The Crisis in Education”⁷) that this means “to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living together” (p. 141). Assuming the history of mankind, i.e. accepting that we are without sacred beginning and without destination and taking up the confrontation, means to ask and investigate how to make sense again of such words as “freedom” or “authority”, how to conceive of education, culture, etc. These are the exercises of thought that Arendt offers in her writings. It is a kind of thinking that, as she writes, “is different from such mental processes as deducing, inducing and drawing conclusions whose logical rules of non-contradiction and inner consistency can be learned once and for all and then need only to be applied” (p. 14). Thinking is also not to interpret or to explain.⁸ It is exercises in thought, and “their only aim is to gain experience in *how* to think; it does not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold. Least of all do they intend to retie the broken thread of tradition or to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between past and future... The question is... about *how* to *move* in this gap” (p. 14). How to be present in/to the present, how to see the present anew, how to deal with it, what to think of it, how to relate to it and how to continue? These exercises are critical of traditional concepts, but this critique is not intended to “debunk” (p. 14), i.e. to unmask or demystify them. Starting from an acknowledgment that, in the strong sense, these concepts no longer mean anything, that their meaning has been “evaporated”, leaving behind “empty shells”, the challenge they present is rather “to distil from them anew their original spirit” (p. 15).⁹ These exercises are to a large extent experiments, which “do not attempt to design some sort of utopian future” (p. 14) or to provide definite solutions, but are *attempts* to clarify some issues and to “gain some assurance in confronting specific questions” (p. 15). These exercises are not part of an academic discipline, but rather expressions of indiscipline. They arise out of the actuality of incidents, incidents of lived experience (p. 14). Their literary form is that of the essay and the work that of an experimenter (p. 15). The experience in thinking can only be won “in doing something”

6 “Hamm (anguished): What’s happening, what’s happening? Clov: Something is taking its course” (Beckett, *Endgame*).

7 See her repeated statement that education “must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition” (Arendt, 1968, p. 195).

8 Arendt (1968) notes that philosophy is “unable to perform the task assigned to it by Hegel and the philosophy of history, that is, to understand and grasp conceptually historical reality and the events that made the modern world what it is” (p. 8).

9 With this idea of “original spirit”, Arendt does not refer to the origins of time or to suprasensuous ideas, but wants to try to relate these concepts to experiences connected to their invention. She is not falling back into some classic form of essentialism.

(p. 14), yet as Arendt writes “we seem to be neither *equipped* nor *prepared* for this activity of thinking, of settling down in the gap between past and future” (p. 13; italics J. M.). Thus, we have to look for equipment and preparation in order to elaborate our experimental and attentive attitude towards the (educational) present, of which we ourselves are part as far as we take up our insertion into time, i.e. as far as we take care of ourselves (as subjects of action).

We have seen how Hannah Arendt conceives of her own work as “exercises in thought” consisting mainly in “experiments”, “arising out of the actuality of incidents”, and having the form of “essays” in which one’s presence in the present is at stake in view of literally enlightening and clarifying that present, of moving in that present, and of inspiring words with a renewed meaning (inspiring life in that present). Philosophy (of education) thus understood as exercise can be educational in three senses. First, as a kind of investigation or research that implies a bringing into play (putting to the test) of the researcher herself, i.e. implying a self-education as “work on the self.” This work is the necessary condition to gain insight into “the battlefield of forces”. But philosophy as an essay is also a public gesture. Second, therefore, it is also educational in the sense that it can have a meaning for others who are invited to share the experience and constitute a public (i.e. they are invited to put themselves to the test and not to be taught). And third, such philosophy can be educational in the sense that the present that is at stake (and is investigated) is the educational present, the present of transformations of educational institutions.

In order to further clarify what such (philosophy as) “exercises in/of thought” entail(s) and what they require (in terms of equipment and preparation), I will now briefly present a concrete and topical example of such an exercise.

3. Educational and philosophical research: the example of the Dardenne brothers

As a concrete topical example of “philosophy of/as education” *in all three senses* mentioned above, I want to refer to the films made by the Belgian directors the Dardenne brothers. It might seem strange to take films as an example, but there is no reason why philosophy (and educational research) would only exist in a book, an article, or a lecture, and not in film. However, it is neither my intention to incite philosophers of education to stop writing and to make films, nor do I ignore the rich approaches within philosophy of education, both in the continental and Anglo-Saxon traditions, that are trying to move in the gap that Arendt refers to. There are those, for example, that were/are engaged in trying to articulate an educational reality and present, rather than to criticize it (e.g. the work by K. Mollenhauer, F. Bollnow, D. Benner, J. Larossa and others), or those who are actually exploring other, more existential or experimental perspectives (e.g. the work of R. Arcilla, D. Hansen, G. Biesta, M. Wimmer, N. Ricken, A. Schäfer, Ch. Thompson, S. Ahrens, etc.). Rather, I want to add to these approaches within philosophy of education, using the example of the Dardennes, in order: (1) to sharpen and deepen the understanding of what an “exercise of thought” (i.e. philosophical work as

educational, experimental work) could look like, especially today in the light of the transformations of educational institutions related to deep changes in our social, technological, and cultural conditions; (2) to indicate more precisely what kind of work ethos and what kind of requirements (in terms of “equipment and preparation”) such an exercise entails; and (3), and most importantly, to clarify what is at stake in such an exercise, what kind of relation towards the present, and towards ourselves in this present, is implied, that is, how this present is approached and how it appears to us.

The feature films of Jean- Pierre and Luc Dardenne have all been made in a small Belgian town that suffers deeply under the decline of old heavy industries. They can be described as, what Cardullo (2009) terms, ‘committed cinema’. The directors have amassed one of the most lauded bodies of work in contemporary world cinema (including twice winning the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival). They investigate in an intriguing way the contemporary reality of education¹⁰ and more particularly the actual relationship between adolescents and adults (fathers, mothers, children, sons, daughters, teachers, students, pupils,...). These films have been described by Héliot (2005) as an “oeuvre d’apprentissage”, i.e. as a kind of “Bildungsfilm” – akin to the “Bildungsroman”. However their films are not really offering a narrative, rather, they *show* a “Bildungsprozess”, which has no end (neither a happy nor a unhappy end), which is neither teleologically determined nor governed by psychological or sociological laws or mechanisms, but in which it is the *dramatis personae* that set reality in motion (they are “motion pictures” in more than one sense). Their films can be seen as empirical philosophical studies of essential educational situations and matters: What does it mean to be a child, an adult, a father, a son, a mother, a daughter, a teacher, a schoolmaster, a pupil? What does it mean, not in general, but in the concrete (and sometimes extreme) situations and conditions that society presents today? Their films investigate these questions and they investigate whether and how answers can be/are given/found. In fact, as I will elucidate, these films are showing us exercises of thought and are in the first place such exercises in themselves.

When asked why they are fascinated by the relationship between adults and adolescents the Dardenne brothers note that they are interested in what can still happen between parents/adults/teachers and children/sons/daughters/students:

This has to do, so they say, with the fact that the city in which we film is full of families destroyed by the economic crisis, unemployment, drugs, where children earn more money than their parents. People are more and more alone. When we first worked on the script of *La Promesse* we also thought about an older character which would have authority over the younger ones, but then we realised that this was nostalgic – there is no longer somebody who can be that authoritative voice. So we simply put them in a situation and asked the question: How are people today able to find their way, alone and without help of the past? How to be human? (Andrew, 2006)

¹⁰ I refer to the five films Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne have made since the mid-nineties: *La Promesse* (in 1996); *Rosetta* (1999; Winner, Palme d’Or, Cannes); *Le Fils* (2002); *L’Enfant* (2005, Winner, Palme d’Or, Cannes); *Le Silence de Lorna* (2008).

Indeed, the Dardennes’ films ask these questions (How to live today? How to give the words a meaning?) in a strong, fascinating, and penetrating way. And it is not difficult to hear how this resounds with the questions and task Hannah Arendt raised: today we are confronted again, without the protection by the past and the bridge of tradition, with the question of human living together. And we can see how this question as a concrete question “arising out of the actuality of incidents” (i.e. the actuality of a small town in Belgium) and related to the personal experience of the filmmakers is nevertheless put before us in such a way that it appears as a common question, the question that also installs a “we”. Their local anchoring does not prevent them from making a kind of “universal” or better, common film. On the contrary, the work of the Dardenne brothers investigates this question of human living together in a way that makes it also become “our” question, the question of the spectators. They invite us to be attentive, to see, and listen, and to think. They make us so to speak into a public; they gather us around this question and what is at stake in it; they also put us to the test (How to find one’s way? How to act in a right way? What does it mean to be a father, etc.?).

What interests me here more particularly is: How do they arrive at this? What do they actually *do*? What kind of ethos is implied?

First of all they investigate the question as a radically open question. They investigate not as gatekeepers of the truth (or speaking in the name of humanity or whomever), but as truth seekers themselves, trying to find out (by way of their film making) how to move in the gap between past and future, how to think i.e. working on an ethos of investigation and filming, including all kinds of preparation and equipment (I will return to this later). The fact that these films are imbued with ethical-philosophical and educational questions does not turn them into a moralising cinema. On the contrary, they give no easy answers and are not preaching any morality. They do not judge: they prove or explain/explicate nothing. Of course, the films do have a frame and are framing, and this frame marks a space, but the space is no interior, no home. Rather it is a kind of space of “exposition”, of being exposed to things (happenings) that become exposed.

Their films do not proclaim or defend any truth; they are not an expression of a doctrine, theory, or conviction. But in their films there is a truth that shows itself in what is happening before the camera. Their camera registers the truth of the words and deeds of the protagonists, a truth that shows itself to us and that manifests itself in an almost inescapable way. As one commentator wrote:

For many people cinema, books, radio, newspapers, journals, politics, even their own family is but a folding screen. Not only to hide from view death, but to hide from view almost everything. Your films pull down the screen and not everyone likes that... Whatever reality is described, stories always confer glamour to the described reality. Filmed stories do that even more than written ones... You apparently film without commentary (and without story). I cannot remember having seen films which are so objective, so purely registering as yours. What makes your films so special is the apparent absence of rhetorics. That makes them sometimes also unbearable. Since rhetorics in films and books softens or attenuates: they indicate

something about the maker and how the work has been made; it offers the spectator the occasion to think: this is bad or terrible, but beautiful. You don't offer the spectator this softening thought of 'this is beautiful', *this possibility to feel distance* towards the described reality and to look at it with the ironic gaze of the distinguished art expert. (Grunberg, 2008; italics J. M.)

In this context I would state that this cinema is in fact a very strong form of empirical research or, better, of empirical philosophy. Further, it may be one of the most important, advanced, and needed forms. One which neither judges nor only observes facts and then makes them known, but one which clarifies or enlightens a(n) (educational) reality. One that makes that which is observed also "speak", we might say, or maybe better, become "real", something that "works"¹¹ and that offers "experience" and, thus, starts to partake in our world (and that is the strong sense of "empirical"). In a way, then, we could argue that the Dardennes show us how, in a world of images, fiction becomes necessary to offer an experience of (the) world, of reality. Or, as Deleuze noted: if the world has turned into a bad movie, an inflation of images, clichés, and simulacra, "authentic" cinema could make us believe again in the world (Deleuze, 1989, p. 181). The Dardennes' films enlighten, not in the sense that they explain or teach us a lesson, but in the sense that they offer an insight into the forces that are operating, that they clarify an issue and, to use the words of Robert Bresson one of their 'movie fathers', that they make appear (disclose) what without them would not appear (Bresson, 1988, p. 82). This is not a revealing of what is underlying or presupposed or invisible, but a disclosing of what in a certain way is enclosed in our present. "Appearing" here has to be taken in the strong sense: they present us with reality,¹² make it real, make it start to take part in/be part of our world. The real is not what is simply given – and as such would appear as object of knowledge – but what comes to appear in an experience where it is not simply an object but starts to live, to communicate. And one of the reasons that the Dardennes can do this is because the filmmakers themselves are present in these films in the sense that they are for themselves real exercises in thought with all the attachment (that is an intimate relationship) and exposition (and one could call this indeed "authentic" as Deleuze suggests) that this entails.

In an interview, J.-P. Dardenne says:

Our documentaries were hieratic or pastoral. [Indeed before they made feature films, they made documentaries in the 1970s and 1980s]. The word had the central role,

11 In German as in Dutch "Wirklichkeit" or "werkelijkheid" (reality) have this connotation of being a work and at work. In this sense the English "reality" could be understood as offering a "thing" a res in the sense of res publica (see Latour, 2005).

12 Although I am aware of the potentially problematic use of the term "reality" (and "immediate"), I don't want to engage in an epistemological debate here. "Real" does not refer here to some kind of "state of affairs" that we would or could know "directly", but to a certain "work" (some-thing-that-works), to something that is the work of "res", a "thing" in the way that, for example, Heidegger and later Latour used this term.

and the film served only as a 'mise-en-scène' of a testimony. Situations, places, actions were shown to sustain what was told in the story. In our documentaries the event or happening always laid in the past. It was re-told. In *La Promesse* this dwelling on words, 'cette mise-en-scène posée', is replaced by the im-mediate present of events/happenings. The camera cannot choose a location that was thought of beforehand, the camera (together with us) also registers for the first time what happens, without making a detour along an organising (ordering) reason. In *La Promesse* the camera registers direct environments. (Verstraeten & Reynders, 1999, p. 54-55; translation J. M.).

The directors use a handheld camera, a camera that surprises and captures at the same time. The way that they film makes clear that the camera does not know what is going to happen. "The camera must show reality, without offering commentary. We transmit happenings, sometimes confusing, sometimes violent, and the camera should behave as we do: just too late to be able to react to what happens" (Verstraeten & Reynders, 1999, p. 54-55). The Dardenne brothers, thus, show us in a radical way film and not a scenario. They don't want to announce or name, define something before we (and they!) have seen it. They are not defining what happens, as is the old philosophical dream, dreamt by analytical philosophy, they are not contextualising or historicising it as is the dream of hermeneutics, they are not deconstructing it as postmodern philosophy aspires to, but they attempt to show the happenings as "actions", i.e. as happenings in the gap between past and future, as experiments and attempts that start from the acceptance of one's insertion in time. They start from the protagonists themselves who try to find out what it means to be a teacher, father, son, mother, etc. and put things in motion.

Indeed, and most importantly, the films remind us that "action" is possible. They show how psychological, sociological, historical laws and forces are *suspended* and how the words "father", "teacher", "mother", etc. could begin to mean something new.¹³ Their films don't show us much of the (personal, social) circumstances of the characters they stage. They don't focus on context or do not reveal mechanisms (for example, of revenge) in which the protagonists would be captured or which would determine their lives and living together. Rather, they offer studies of the ability to act and speak, to begin anew, to break the law of social, psychological, historical gravity. The films show an insertion in the continuum of time, a gap between past and future, and are themselves trying to move in such a gap, testifying to such insertion (that is also why they are able to offer us an insight into the "forces" that are at work, to use the words of Arendt). Therefore in their films the Dardennes do not start from a plot or story (which would be there/in place before the protagonists themselves and would take them along, as would

13 They show how to escape social, historical, psychological, laws and processes; how to not simply repeat social, historical, psychological "definitions" of what it means to be a father, etc. For example, in *La Promesse*: how can the boy escape the process started by the criminal father and be a son in another way? In *Rosetta*: how can Rosetta take a distance from her alcohol addicted mother and be a daughter in another way? In *Le Fils*: how can the father of a murdered son escape the circle of revenge and be a "father" in another way?

laws or habits), but from the protagonists and situations, i.e. they engage in a certain relation to what happens in the present.

Every "given" is first submitted to the test of film itself: naked presence and duration (it is as if the words and deeds, the gestures, appear as such, on their own, as "empty shells" that at the same moment start to gain meaning again). Only afterwards can we assign the fragments a place in the course of events. Because of their fascination with the sudden illumination of moments, the Dardennes often make us wait minutes before we grasp something of the meaning of a scene. But this meaning does not refer to a story, but to a protagonist (personage) and a situation. Their cinema does not tell stories, it does not narrate, but registers. As Luc Dardenne notes, referring to *Rosetta*: "To narrate impedes or obstructs existence... [T]he less one tells about a persona, the more it exists... Rather than narrating, we have tried to find the *gestures* which were essential to the character" (Sartor, 2001, p. 15; italics and translation J. M.). The story (history) does not precede the characters, but is organised around them and starting from them. It is the characters, their gestures and movements, and their words, that offer the starting point, and not the plot. The films, therefore, have no clear beginning or end. They have no history that explains the actions we see (which does not imply that history and context have no meaning). The characters are *there* (and it is important that they are *there* – present to the situation, and not absent, distracted, immunized); the camera registers what they do or do not do and this is more important than who they are and what will happen.¹⁴ This happening is also shown as fragments from a journey ("un parcours") and not of a discourse ("un discours"). Very often, we as spectators are set in a situation and only gradually can we find out why the characters act as they do. Luc Dardenne notes:

This is to avoid explaining to the spectator that the mother of this character did this and that and that that is the reason why she acts as she acts. If you do that, the character stops living. This is why in mainstream cinema, when you explain why characters are behaving in a certain way, the public understands this explanation, but in fact has understood nothing. We want the spectators of our films to not be able to explain where the characters are coming from, and why they behave in such and such a way, but they will be able to see that these characters are able to deal with the situation. (Sartor, 2001, p. 15)

They are able to act, to begin! The Dardennes do not only make clear that and how today fiction is necessary to make something appear as "real", but also to make appear the possibility to act, or to show the truth of action as the possibility to begin (or poten-

14 As Luc Dardenne (2005) writes: "L'acteur n'a pas une 'intérieurité' qu'il pourrait vouloir exprimer. Devant la caméra il est là, il se comporte... Il doit s'abstraire de toute volonté et rejoindre l'involontaire... Nos indications aux acteurs sont physiques et la plupart du temps négatives pour les arrêter chaque fois que nous sentons qu'ils sortent du comportement qu'ils ont pour la caméra. Enregistrant ce comportement, la caméra pourra enregistrer l'apparition de regards et de corps plus intérieurs que toute intérieurité exprimée par le jeu des acteurs. Pour la caméra, les acteurs sont des *révélateurs*, pas des constructeurs. *Ce qui demande beaucoup de travail*" (p. 106; italics J. M.).

tiality), and to gather us (as a public) around such questions as: What does it mean to be father, son, teacher, mother ... *today*?

To put it in a more general way, the Dardennes are doing this: trying the words (teacher, student, father, son, mother, daughter, adult, child,...), trying the verbs (educating, teaching, speaking,...) once again where "things are taking their course". They interrupt the course and open a space of practical freedom. This may be another way to formulate what "authentic cinema", in the words of Deleuze, is able to do, and to indicate in what sense it might be called educational without "teaching" us something. And that is why their cinema is not only a very realistic, hard, and terrifying cinema, but also an essentially optimistic cinema. Something takes its course, but you can try to make the present present, i.e. to present the gap between past and future and to present examples of how to move in this gap, offering a kind of happiness and hope, but it is a pure hope, without foundation and guarantee, without destination/end (accepting that there is no sacred beginning and no destination in the words of Arendt), and is therefore a specifically pure (human) hope. Their films do not only offer us documents (and narratives), nor do they simply illustrate or tell or explain, but they enlighten our educational present and bring it into play. They are not only offering us something to see. There is something to see (and they discover it with us and we with them), but also this seeing is precisely a way *to make* us think, to engage us (they offer us philosophical, ethical, educational questions as existential questions), and to inspire us. Or better, they offer us a "seeing for the first time", which makes us think again. It is not that they would offer us a social reality in its crudity or try to go "directly" or "immediately" to the truth, but that a certain aesthetics (of the realistic genre) obliges us to take part in a (sensory) experience. (See also Rancière, 1999; Prédal, 2005). Inventing a new (image) language, using particular equipment and preparations, they show the complexity of reality, its unpredictable course, but also the space of thought (the present as a gap) in which they invite us as in a kind of "collective experiment", to use the words of Bruno Latour (2004).

Taking up the words of Arendt, these films are "essays" and experiments. They are not thought experiments, however, but experiments in/of thought, the experiment being precisely the exposition of what one thinks and is (What kind of subject? e.g. father etc.). And therefore their truth-telling is a truth-telling that comes out of a sense of urgency and is one in which the authors are present. If it works, then the reader or spectator is offered not only an insight but also an experience, and this experience is also an experience of freedom, a freedom with regard to the way things "take their course" (as "sempiternal change" in Arendt's words). She does not have to accept what is written or shown, or even believe it, but when witnessing this not-indifferent writing or filming, she can partake (or feel invited to partake) in the risk of discourse and of a usage (of words and verbs) that is not assured, disciplined, and safe (immunized). She might be reminded of her own difficulty by the way the films are written or made, and the way their authors are present in it and, therefore, could be ready to engage.

The cinema of the Dardenne brothers offers us an example of a way of doing research in which all kinds of devices and preparations are used, implying particular ways to live their own lives and to live together and work together out of passion or love for the truth

and curiosity towards the present. These devices and preparations, invented throughout the years (see further), and a continued experimental ethos and attentive attitude constitute together the conditions for speaking the truth and for letting truth appear or finding a way to move in the gap. Moreover, their films tell a truth in such a way that it becomes difficult *not to be concerned*, and for that reason they can bring us to put ourselves to the test.

4. Setting up laboratories, experiments, and fieldwork

The work of the Dardennes can be regarded as an example or paradigm of philosophy of education. It is “educational research”, not only as research on education, revealing something or offering knowledge about our educational present, but as an exercise of thought, making a public gesture, inviting us to think i.e. to put us to the test. Such philosophy of education is not an academic discipline, but rather a kind of indiscipline. It involves (1) taking up the questions: What does it *mean* to be an adult, a child, a father, a son, a teacher, a student, etc. today?; What does it *mean* to live a *human* life today?; What is education?; What is a school?; What is a university?; What is teaching? etc. It involves (2) trying to make these questions into “our” questions, questions that put me and us to the test, common questions i.e. to make them public and gather a public around them. Philosophy of education, then, is to try the words and the verbs again, to expose them so that they can start again to mean something or to speak (Masschelein 2011). Therefore, I think it is helpful to conceive of the site of such a philosophy of education as a laboratory or workshop (rather than a ‘center’ or ‘institute’) and to conceive of its practice in terms of experimentation,¹⁵ exercise, fieldwork,¹⁶ or attempts (essays).¹⁷ Deriving from the Latin *laborare*, the term laboratory was used, according to the Larousse Dictionary, for the place where chemical composites were produced, and also for the place of *study* and, until the 18th century for the workshop of painters and sculptors. It can be conceived, then, as a space organised and operating as an experimental system that should allow for (new) things to happen, to appear as such, to make them ‘public’, or make them present, emphasizing the practice of *making* as *trying* to call into

15 See e.g. Deligny (1976). For a fascinating and inspiring analysis of the meaning of the experiment to rethink ‘Bildung’ and educational philosophy and theory, relying partly on the work of H. J. Rheinberger, see Ahrens (2011).

16 The term ‘fieldwork’ in philosophy is a term used also by P. Rabinow and N. Rose in their introduction to the ‘Essential Foucault’, to distinguish Foucault’s use of “exercise” from that found in philosophy or social theory of the traditional sort. They talk about a certain ethos of investigation (and not about a methodology) implying detailed and meticulous labour, a movement of thought that invents, makes use of, and modifies conceptual tools as they are set into a relation with specific practices and problems, which they themselves help to form in new ways. According to them, the question for Foucault was whether it was “possible to develop a kind of critical thought that would not judge – so much criticism has the form of a quasi-judicial tribunal passing down verdicts of guilt or innocence on persons or events – but would create, produce, intensify the possibilities within existence. And this, perhaps, is the challenge which his work lays down to us today” (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. 18). It is a form of work that is articulated also as “empirical philosophy” (Mol, 2000).

17 See e.g. Thompson (2009).

presence (or, as Bresson suggests: to make appear what would not appear without this practice). In this line, and using the words of Arendt, we could say that in order to take up the questions and try the words and verbs again we need “equipment” (devices and protocols) and “preparations”. These should help us to become attentive (to be present in the present), to expose ourselves, to develop (based on an intimate relationship) an experimental stance and to make things appear and become public. A laboratory, then, is the habitat (including equipment, devices, preparations, ways of living or working, etc.) that offers the conditions for the development of a philosophical ethos as an attentive and experimental ethos, and for capturing, in a certain sense, what is happening today.

Let us take some suggestions for this habitat and, in particular, its equipment and preparations and for how to proceed, i.e. the attentive and experimental ethos, from the Dardennes themselves. For them, making films is the art of representing nothing with images – signifying nothing (Rotman, 1987) – but making something able to appear and become some thing (something that concerns us, and *starts* to signify or to speak) that would not appear without their work. They have no clear objective they aim at, no message they want to convey, but they ask themselves what is ‘human’ in present day conditions? To make appear what happens to humanity, they put people (actors) in a situation before the camera in order to see and to capture what happens. They establish an experimental condition, starting from an ethos of investigation and questioning that combines a thorough preparation with a certain poverty or self-indulged limitation of means, in order to arrive at an attentive attitude. Because they do not really know what they are looking for (they hope it will happen before the camera), their way of working cannot be conceived strictly as a method. Rather they organise an occasion based on a protocol that offers a certain chance that something will appear and communicate, that something will be disclosed. A protocol is a clear guideline, which one follows time and again, but that has no clear ‘end’, no destination. It is a kind of ‘way’ that leads nowhere; it is like a cut that opens onto a world. Going this way is not about realising one’s intentions or responding to one’s expectations, but is a way that implies repetition and mechanical regularity without ‘meaning’, precisely to de-centre our intentions. As Bresson (1998) writes: “Cela parcequ’une mécanique fait surgir l’inconnu, et non parcequ’on a trouvé d’avance cet inconnu” (p. 70). The protocol helps to suspend too-familiar stories; it cuts the illusion of some “pure genius”. The Dardennes make use of devices (handcamera, particular locations, particular costumes, etc...) and refuse a certain comfort in order to displace themselves and, in a way, to defamiliarize themselves, to make themselves into strangers. They rely on a particular discipline of the body and the mind, they refuse to interpret and to explain the present, they avoid contextualising and historicizing. Rather they try to “cut” into the present and to penetrate it by producing it (making fiction – *factum* in Latin). They are not so much trying to understand, grasp, know, and tell stories, but trying to think, to articulate, to enlighten, and to “make” or add things.

Talking about their “protocol” they refer to the constraints they place on themselves. First of all, there are spatial constraints: they cut out some parts of the world and use existing physical spaces to create a scenario. This constraint is accompanied by a self-imposed poverty of financial and technical means. Their work is not to realise, start-

ing from a clear story, as almighty directors, the *mise-en-scène* which could be dreamt off, but to create out of some intuitions and questions a situation in which something could happen. This implies arranging the situation in such a way that, far from everything being possible, in fact very little is possible (e.g. the spaces are often so small and defined that the camera men are very limited in the positions they can take; they don't use *découpage*; the dialogues are almost completely fixed on beforehand; they only use one kind of lens, etc.). Their preparation and the preparations of the actors are very long and thorough, so that they increase their own acquaintance (or intimacy) with the situation as much as possible. They exhaust their actors in order to make them abandon their intentions and refrain from "expressing" some interiority, so that they just "act" in the situation. This requires a lot of work, as Luc Dardenne (2005) writes: "Ce qui demande beaucoup de travail" (p. 106).

To create a laboratory, then, requires work to be done. This work is, to a large extent, work on the self, implying also work that enables something to appear, that makes something present, that catches something of what is happening, and enables us to dismiss our reflections. (Bresson: "Il ne s'agit pas de diriger quelqu'un, mais de se diriger soi-même" Bresson, 1988, p. 16) A laboratory is a place to perform experiments and to create experiences, it is a place to study and to *expose oneself*. Like the Dardennes, by accepting (rather than judging) our educational present, we could maybe look for new ways, equipment, procedures, and devices in order, as Bergson said, not to see what we think, but to think what we see, to expose our thinking to what is happening (to the present), and to get beyond our own reflections, to break them. This asks for an art of being "there", that changes a there into a "here". (This is what is involved in what we call fieldwork). In order to see, in order to put oneself to the test of educational "reality", the laboratory is therefore also a *place of registration*. It develops the equipment to "see" something; that is, it employs devices to make present (to "fictionalize") and to register that present. To take up what is suggested by the work of the Dardennes, and to say that the laboratory is a place of exposition and registration, means that such work is about a way of doing that refrains from activities of judgment and gatekeeping (questions have to be really open questions), that defers or suspends definitions (and disciplinings), explanations, interpretations, contextualisations, deconstructions, or historicisations, and that in a way "makes fiction". In this sense, we can think of further developing this art as an art of making things public (to literally articulate the questions) and to gather a public around the questions of our educational present. Making things public (as matters of public concern) is thus the result of work on the self that breaks open the common horizon of our self-understanding ("things taking their course") and taken for granted practices (that is, what "we" regard as "matters of fact"), and hence transforms them into matters of concern. This kind of research is an attempt to go beyond the distinction between empirical and conceptual, and in which the very act of investigating one's present puts, at the same time, the (existential-ethical) position of the researcher at stake (See Masschelein & Simons, 2008). This kind of research, taking up the experimental attitude and providing experimental knowledge, would then take place in a *laboratory* where "work on the self" is at stake. Such a laboratory would have a particular

public function. Or more precisely, this workshop or laboratory would itself be a *public space* because the main focus is not on matters of fact (*waiting there for the researcher to study them*) but on matters of concern *generated/produced* by existential-ethical work and by making fiction that generates a public (gesture).

To summarize: the work of philosophy of education, then, is to make us think by making things public; it is exercises of thought. It is about registering, seeing, illuminating, bringing into play, penetrating, inviting, inspiring, experimenting; it is about exposing oneself and trying the words and verbs again. I did, in the end, not really address the "transformation" of educational institutions. Nor did I go into the various attempts made today to deal with them by trying to explain and judge them. I think that what is important today is to make the questions – "What is education?", "What is adulthood?"; "What is a child?"; "What is a university?"; "What is a school?"; "What is a family?"; "What is an asylum?"; "What is a teacher?"; "What is a student?" etc. – once more into *real* questions i.e. into matters of concern (matters that make us think), and into "common" things or public things, *res publica*. This implies that these "what" questions are not questions seeking definitions or atemporal essences, but are open, existential questions asking what it could mean to educate, to be an adult, etc., that reinvent their meaning, for reinventing a truly human life.

Things take their course, transformations are taking place, and all kinds of forces are at work (Simons & Masschelein, 2008). Maybe it is important not to forget oneself as the point where and through which the forces work, and where and through which "insight in the game of forces that constitute our existence" (Faust, 382-84) can be gained, but also where and through which they are split up and broken, where and through which they are cut. That is why laboratories and fieldwork could be useful, to put ourselves to the test of contemporary reality.

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