YOUTH HOUSES AND CINEMATIC EDUCATION: PLA(Y)CES OF LINGERING DISTRACTION

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Abstract

Flemish youth work is unique globally. In no other country does youth work have so much freedom and funding to create specific spaces for young people. This article examines one example from Flemish youth to make an argument that youthful places should be cultivated. This argument is made following one of Walter Benjamin's earliest essays 'The Metaphysics of Youth' in which he defends and elaborates on the specific ontological dimension of youth. This article examines this ontological power of youth in relation to the use of technology in one Flemish youth house and how this can lead to a form of cinematic education. Ultimately, youth works straddles a thin line between being a constant goal-oriented educational environment and mere senseless diversion. While the cultivation of attention is an important part of a formal classroom, in the informal environment of youth work pure attention would be an anathema to its collective cinematic educational environment. Therefore, youth work is an important space of resistance to many of the neoliberal and noneducational discourses winding their way through education today.

Keywords: cinematic education, Youth work, Walter Benjamin, youth, Tyson Lewis, technology, education, educational philosophy.

Mother Mary in Purgatory

We're standing in the middle of the historic chapel that houses the open youth work organization "Purgatory".[1] I am currently getting a tour by one of the youth workers who gracefully wanted to participate in the focus group today and offered up his organization's building as a location. We have just stopped in front of the bar. Drinks flow from here at night, but right now no one else is present. Enshrined by four coolers containing a collection of drinks and adorned with Coca Cola and Red Bull logos – surrounded by somewhat ostentatious speakers – we are greeted by a beautiful statue of The Holy Virgin Mary flanked by four marble pillars. With Her left arm she seems to be heroically holding on to The Christ Child as the stump of Her right arm points towards something invisible. Perhaps

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[1] Translated from the Dutch "Vagevuur".

to the cruel sinner that took Her arm away from Her. Beneath Her feet in the shrine below, fittingly, there are bottles of Her Child's blood in varying states of fullness, flanked by empty cartons of crisps. As I crane my head to get a better look at the statue, I see a hollow behind the shrine. A pile of wires and various clothes are stacked behind Her, strategically placed so that the golden lines of the statue hide most of the haphazard-looking mess by drawing attention to Mary Herself. Our guide speaks. 'She used to have Her right hand when we came into possession of the building a couple years ago. Then one day it disappeared.' The guide shrugs his shoulders and grins. 'It gives Her a personality, at least for the youths. They dress Her up, you know? For the Mexican-themed party they gave Her a sombrero. She even has an Instagram account. They put Her up online and people come to see Her'. He points proudly towards the small and barely visible laptop next to the stack of wine on the Communion Table and smiles again. 'She's even been put in charge of the music. People take selfies with Her and sometimes someone even falls asleep behind her. Without Her, Purgatory wouldn't be quite the same.'

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Figure 1.
Mother Mary in Purgatory
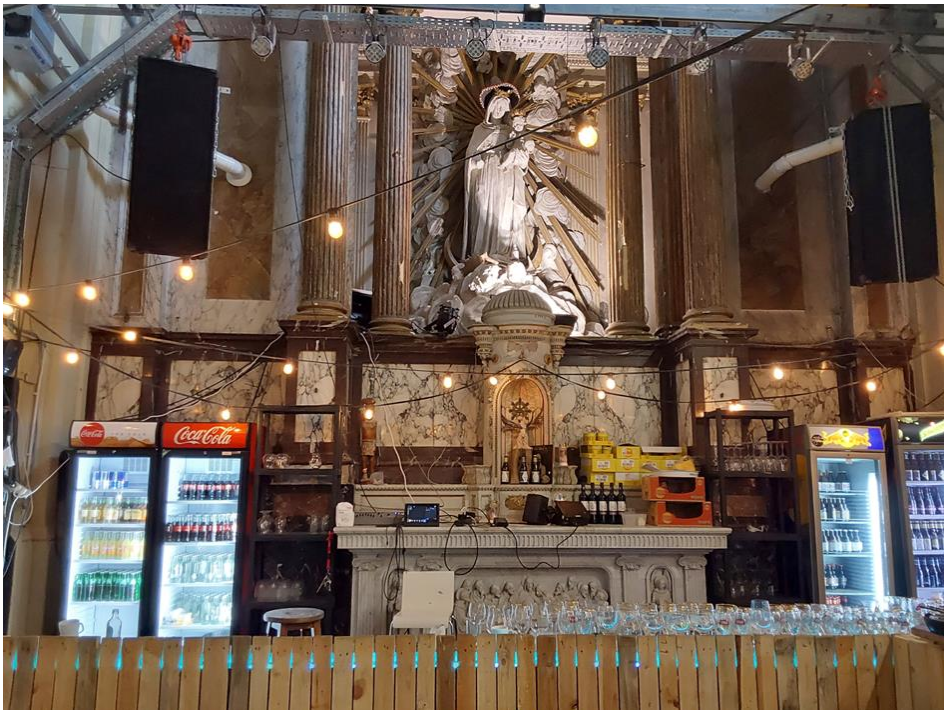
Introduction

The preceding anecdote illustrates a particular situation in Flemish youth work. Youth work is certainly present in many countries globally (e.g., Farrugia, 2018, 2021; Honwana, 2012), but holds a distinctive position in Flemish society (Coussée, 2006). Especially the so-called 'youth houses' are held in widespread regard as places for youths to be 'young together' (Faché, 2013). In practice, youth houses often serve as venues for parties, workshops, concerts, and various social activities. That is to say, youth workers (famously) do not adapt their programs to suit specific profiles, but rather trust that the emergent capabilities of the presence of the youths together are enough to create a collective experience that is educational for all those present (e.g. Cools et al., 2019).

Most importantly, these activities are always focused on the leisure time of young people. Especially in open youth houses, educational objectives are seldom predefined before each activity. Despite external actors attempting to steer youth houses towards serving "democratic citizenship, emancipation, community life, and a sense of responsibility" (Coussée, 2006, p. 7),[2] the concept of youth houses as a time of collective play and diversion remains the ideal upheld by many grassroots organizations. Coussée (2006) even argues, in continuation of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, that the essence of youth houses is play. Other authors, such as Danny Wildemeersch have even further argued that the very existence of youth work is paradoxical in this sense: it walks a thin line between *useless playfulness and playful usefulness* (1997). Furthermore, in my own research I have concluded that while youth work may be infused with play and distraction, this play is always collective and requires a big commitment, both in time and effort from the youths themselves (Torenbosch & Vandenabeele, 2023).

In this essay, I will argue that it is within this essence of collective play that youth houses cultivate a particular *obstinacy*,[3] specifically regarding the use of technology, through which the youths within youth work resist the individualization of the youth house experience. This obstinacy differs from the revolutionary potential of youth work, which, while valuable, is often associated with direct political action (Honwana, 2012). The obstinacy of youth work does not necessarily immediately translate into political action beyond the youth houses. However, I will argue that it represents an essential form of educational and digital resistance to the same forces that necessitate such political action. Drawing upon Tyson Lewis' insights from *Antifascist Education: From Riddles to Radio* (2020) and Walter Benjamin's early work *The Metaphysics of Youth* (1913), I will argue that what youth houses offer is a form of cinematic education. To support this argument, I will briefly explain why Belgian youth work embodies the

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[2] Translated from Dutch.

[3] This term I have borrowed from Negt and Kluge's work *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981) which they have developed through the constellative thinking of Benjamin.

youth experience central to Benjamin's philosophy. Subsequently, I will posit that the experience provided in Belgian youth houses is inherently cinematic. Afterwards, I will argue that it is precisely through this cinematic and educational nature that youth houses transform the individualistic and invasive aspects of technology into a resistance against the individualization of experience. Finally, I will touch upon the importance of approaching youth work as exactly this space of ontological and obstinate resistance.

Youth work and youth as an educational experience

In his early work, *The Metaphysics of Youth*, Walter Benjamin discusses what the experience of youth should entail. For him, all too often, the time spent in one's youth is consistently devoted to serving the future, both on an individual and societal level. In other words, when we speak of childhood, we refer to it not as a time of the present, both in a material and metaphysical sense, but rather as a time in service to an imagined future. This means that being young is seldom considered as a time to experience for its own sake, but rather as a period to utilize in the process of becoming the person we are *meant* to be. In the introduction I have noted a number of things in which we can see this in youth work, such as the continuous attempts to make it serve official 'lifelong learning' goals (e.g. citizenship or entrepreneurial education).[4]

It is this determinism of experience that Benjamin laments. The time of youth, or so Benjamin writes about one of the youthful subjects of his essay,

> [t]he fulfilled tranquillity in which his late maturity would ripen was stolen from him. It was purloined by everyday reality, which in a thousand ways, with event, accident, and obligation, disrupted youthful time, immortal time, at which he did not guess. […] From day to day, second to second, the 'I' preserves itself, clinging to the instrument – time – **it was supposed to play** (2011, p. 150, my emphasis).

For Benjamin, one of the difficulties of having become an adult is that the nature of experience becomes self-destructive as we age. Instead of experiencing things on their own merit, adults demarcate experiences, and when looking back on them, they condescend them. In doing so, adults claim to have experienced [*erlebt*] everything that youth had to offer to them (cf. Fox, 2014). It is this experience of youth that Walter Benjamin fervently disagrees with. In the *The Metaphysics of Youth*, he likens this self-destructive tendency to the act of keeping a diary. Not because diaries are factually incorrect, but because diaries, in and of themselves, cannot capture the present experience. Or, as Benjamin writes:

> The landscape sends us the beloved. We encounter nothing that is not in landscape, and in it nothing but future. It knows only the one girl who is already woman. For she enters the diary with the history of her future (Benjamin, 2011, p. 153).

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[4] As set in stone by the European Union (e.g. Hozjan, 2009).

We can only read diaries with our knowledge of the future. Time, which was meant to be experienced as an unexpected playground, has instead been colonized by our future selves.

Instead of embracing the uncertainty and unexpected nature of youthful experience, we focus our attention on becoming something more than 'just' a youth. In the midst of this quest for the self-preservation of this imagined 'I', so Benjamin writes, "the diary begins: this unfathomable book of a life never lived, book of a life in whose time everything we experienced inadequately is transformed and perfected" (Benjamin, 2011, p. 150). By appropriating childhood time in such a manner, individuals isolate their experience of the world. In doing so, they lay claim to the time of childhood, a time they never truly experienced when it was unfolding. This time – unexperienced by the diary's reader – is then entirely appropriated to serve the process of becoming an adult. It is as if we were to assert that our childhood experiences were destined to mould us into nothing, but the person we are today. Just as the person we are today is forever destined to become the person we are tomorrow; The collective and tumultuous experience (i.e. as a time where the unexpected *can* happen) of 'being young' is individualized to justify the adult we are to be, or have become. In other words, the potentiality of youth has been cashed in for an adult in-the-making. It might be worth pointing out at this juncture that I do not argue for a kind of fetishization of *eternal* youthful experience that is, for example, inherent in Ur-fascism as identified by Umberto Eco (e.g. 1995). Rather, my argument is about acknowledging the importance of the present and collective experience *of being young as an ontological category* (as Benjamin does as well).[5]

Thus, when discussing youthful experiences, Benjamin observed in his time, and I see in our time, that being young is seldom, if ever, valued as an experience worth having in the present, on its own terms. This lack of attention to youth as an ontological and educational experience is especially apparent in educational and political discourses. This is problematic, as it is precisely by embracing the present uncertainty that the youth experience can become a realm of the unforeseen,[6] where it holds the greatest potentiality, according to Benjamin (1913).

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[5] Other authors, such as Hannah Arendt and her idea of *natality* (e.g. Arendt, 1958) also emphasize the importance of "new" things coming in. Therefore, while this essay explores youth work, the importance of youthful experiences as a renewal of education are not necessarily linked to a sociological conception of youth.

[6] In everything is preserved the potential space of play [*Spielraum*] that would make it possible to become a site [*Schauplatz*] of new, unforeseen constellations. **The definitive, the characteristic are avoided**. No situation appears just as it intended as such forever; no form asserts its own "just so, and not otherwise". (Modified translation of Benjamin 1996 in Benjamin, 2008, p. 7)

This colonization of experience in the service of haunts our schools, homes, and personal lives, especially in the light of the ever-grasping tendrils and instrumentalization of experience inherent in the 'lifelong learning' discourses (e.g. Biesta, 2005; 2015; Lewis, 2022). However, Flemish youth houses, in their unique configuration, can sometimes still epitomize the ideal of youthful experience that Benjamin spoke of[7]. This ideal acknowledges the ontological power of youth – as Joris Vlieghe also writes in his essay that is included in this issue – as being capable of doing something completely unanticipated and unexpected without any pre-fixed meaning.

In my analysis of various youth work practices (Torenbosch & Vandenabeele, 2023), one thing has become abundantly clear: youth houses in Flanders still uniquely offer a space for youths to be young *together*. In fact, the defining characteristic of many of the youth work initiatives that I researched was that:

> [they would work] with whomsoever knocks on the door of, or is present in, the youth house, youth association, or youth initiative. Importantly, according to our respondents, is that this also includes **all** youths. Even if the youths have not informed themselves about the initiative or cannot show how they would be an added value for the youth work initiative. They would still be welcome in the youth house and not be refused (pp. 18–19, transl. from Dutch).

> Therefore, youth work does not create any *a priori* conditions on who can and who cannot be part of an activity. Instead, youth workers always work with the group that is already present'. Significantly, these initiatives very often had no pre-defined goals. Instead, what these youth work initiatives focused on was creating a collective experience in which youths could encounter one another. (Torenbosch & Vandenabeele, 2023)

This approach to experience is visible in the anecdote I recalled earlier. While the statue of Mary is certainly, in a way, looming over the youth house, as is the fact that the very space itself is religious, what makes the experience collective and obstinate is the profane[8] way in which the youths redeem the meaning of the statue in their own activities. Instead of being beholden to any rules as to *how* the statue of Mary should be used, the youths use her in the moment as the object that allows for encounters. It might seem too playful, and undoubtedly offend those with more traditional sensibilities, but

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[7] As a critical note: of course not every youth house embodies Benjamin's ideal experience of youth at every given moment. Like I noted in the introduction, there are many youth houses, and broader youth initiatives that do follow dominant discourses where youths *have* to learn something in the youth houses. However, my point with this article is to argue for the importance of cultivating specifically non-didactical, collective and youthful spaces in Flemish youth work and beyond.

[8] With this I mean the childlike refusal that the youths have towards acknowledging the societal importance of the statue (e.g. Agamben, 2005; Lewis, 2014a). This refusal is a 'return to the use and property' of objects to youths (Agamben, 2007, p. 73. It is in this 'passage from the sacred to the profane' that comes about 'by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play.' (p. 75). At the end of the article I will highlight the importance of this playfulness.

the fact that the young people are capable of transforming the space they inhabit *together* embodies the ontological power of youth that Benjamin refers to. It is a refusal to dwell in what something is *supposed* to mean and instead it signifies an attempt to constantly change the meaning of the statue in the present with the other youths that are *present*. In this way, youth houses can be uniquely educational. Since, in the first place, they allow for new relationalities to emerge through distraction away from the supposed meaning of their encounters in the youth work space. Lewis writes in his book

Studying as resistance

Tyson Lewis argues that in the current age has been colonized by a the specific type of thinking that Benjamin argues against. This type of thinking can only see experience as an instrument for reaching certain goals. There are many similarities between Lewis' argument and the concerns that Benjamin expressed in *The metaphysics of youth*. Learning, instead of being an unpredictable *educational* experience, instead has become a managerial tool that pushes individuals in certain directions. Rather than letting learning unfold as an experience, nowadays it is placed in a framework of set expectations as to what the learning should lead to. Much like the diary of youth that Benjamin describes, by framing learning as only being instrumental towards something else, it loses the ability to allow students to have an encounter with the study material on its own terms. For Lewis, and other educational authors such as Gert Biesta (e.g. 2015), these preconceived notions of learning have led to the learnification of society. Or, as he writes with Peter Hyland (2022) in *Studious drift: Movements and protocols for a postdigital education*:

> On our interpretation, learnification of society indicates that learning has become the educational metaphysics of the scientific age. It reduces education to a set of contingencies in order to govern these contingencies through the generation of evidence capable of making predictions concerning future outcomes. The science of pedagogy becomes a management strategy concerned with inputs and outputs guided by the law of educational excellence, efficacy, and efficiency. This process, in turn, determines the kind of educational life a student will have, what kinds of opportunities they will have access to, and what kinds of debts will have to be paid to achieve certain ends (p. 5).

'Learning', therefore, has transformed into a managerial tool. In an effort to reclaim education from learning, inspired by Biesta, Lewis makes a move to studying as a way of reclaiming the educational experience. Due to the limits of this article I cannot fully do justice to his argument, but I will shortly introduce his thinking on studying.

Lewis writes in his book *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and educational potentiality* (2013) that studying, as opposed to learning, denotes those practices that are capable of lingering in 'im-potentiality', a term he borrows from Agamben. This im-potentiality expresses itself as a refusal of studying to fall into the rhythms of

(false) urgency that are pushed by neoliberal biopolitics. As, through this urgency, practices always have to have a direct and measurable impact (i.e. to 'fulfill' their potential). Importantly, this also means that studying, for Lewis, should also not immediately follow any political instrumentalization, no matter how relevant, or urgent this may seem.[9] Instead, studying in an educational sense means that students are allowed to linger in an educational situation without any pre-set goals and through this encounter the world. In his words: in study, "the dispersed and decentered apparatuses of learning are left to idle, and thus opened to unforeseen usages beyond measure and beyond identification with this, or that utility within a market driven by entrepreneurial self-management" (Lewis, 2013, p. 15). In other words, studying allows practices to resist ever-increasing neoliberal demands.

This resistance of neoliberal demands can be very illustrative in the case of technology,[10] as it is technology in the form of digital textbooks, educational videos, student monitoring systems, and more which often linked to neoliberal demands and rhythms (e.g. Ball & Grimaldi, 2022). In the rest of this article I will dive into how Flemish youth work shows us how a cinematic and educational experience can resist the individualistic and invasive aspects of technology. To do this, I will first need to explain the role technology plays in the work of Benjamin. Then, through a reading of Tyson Lewis's work, I will emphasize the importance of distraction as a crucial element in a cinematic and thus educational experience.

Walter Benjamin and cinematic education

Technology had a special place for Benjamin, as between 1927 and 1933 he did a great number of broadcasts for children on Radio Berlin and the Radio Frankfurt Youth Hour, in which he tried to reach children didactically.[11] However, cinema too, for Benjamin, was important. For him, cinema was a strange place where both educational and commercial values converged which made a new kind of experience possible (Lewis, 2020). An experience that was at once both didactical, but distracting at the same time. For him, the fact that films are not *only* didactical, nor *merely* distraction is an important fact; neither of these elements should be elevated above the other.

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[9] In fact, he notes that that in some forms of learning there "is the need to become revolutionary vanguards" (Lewis, 2013, p. 14) that urge towards action instead of study. Even though this is well meant, this still instrumentalizes study into learning.

[10] In this article, "technology" refers to commonly understood devices and machines that develop rapidly and are quickly adopted into everyday use, such as cars, phones, and televisions. This is particularly relevant for technologies like phones and televisions, which were once stationary but have become increasingly mobile and ubiquitous.

[11] Tyson Lewis has an excellent analysis of the pedagogical principles behind the radio broadcast that I cannot explicate here (see: Lewis, 2022), also because the focus of this article is his cinematic education.

After all, if we were to focus only on the didactical value of the movies, we would again be trying to cash in on their potential and maximize learning profits. At the same time, if we were to be only distracted by the movie no educational experience would be had as we were too distracted to pay attention. As Lewis (2020) writes in his book *Walter Benjamin's antifascist education*:

> [Benjamin aims for a distraction] as alertness coupled with horizontal, nondiscriminating openness. As opposed to mere diversion, distraction for Benjamin has a certain educational value. It is the special mode of attunement that is both necessitated by modern living (e.g., in cities), while at the same time capable of rerouting its effects in less alienating and more emancipatory directions. (p. 18)

Like Benjamin, Lewis affords a particular hopeful role to the existence of cinema by emphasizing its dialectic and educational possibilities. Specifically, Lewis argues that the important educational elements of cinema are that it is embodied, collective, and again importantly *distracting* (Lewis, 2020).[12] Especially distraction is often forgotten in (formal) education nowadays, as it makes the place for didactics and learning goals (e.g. Biesta, 2015).

In his reply to Lewis' book, Mario Di Paolantonio questions if the hopeful place that Lewis and Benjamin allocate to technology is even possible in the modern age (cf. Di Paolantonio, 2021). Technologies, so he argues, "are so pervasive and widespread that they 'just do not 'shock', or 'stand out', or solicit collective 'potentiality' in the same way they did in Benjamin's era" (Di Paolantonio, 2021, p. 111). He reminds us, that in Benjamin's time the cinema was relatively new, and more importantly, literally set apart and experienced in spaces that allowed for a collectivizing and embodied experiences in a specific place, for a particular *duration of time*, with an entrance and exit that marked the possibility for distraction to truly emerge and linger. For Di Paolantonio, new digital technologies do not demand a certain time and place, but instead demand our constant individual attention. In response to Di Paolantonio's critique, Lewis acknowledges this danger of modern technology and ends with the question: "How can education today become *more* cinematic and *less* digital?" (Lewis, 2021, p. 115). It is this call that I wish to take up.

Tyson and Di Paolantonio – as well as Joris Vlieghe and Yotam Hotam in their respective essays in this issue – express a level of pessimism towards the possibility of modern technology to even allow experience to be made collective, or serve as a form of resistance to individualization. Their concerns are understandable. When we think of modern technology – and youth – the image that comes to mind is composed of a million and one tiny, personal devices demanding our constant input and attention. In this way, technology actively distracts us *from* collective distraction as we no

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[12] The reader will notice that it is these elements in the youth house that I will elaborate on throughout this article.

longer have an embodied experience, but rather a digital one. There is no way to just be present in the world with the others around you, without being reminded that one is connected to countless other humans *out there.* In the terms used by Lewis and Di Paolantonio, the cinematic experience of youth, characterized by collective distraction in a specific place, is eroded. Modern technology, with its increasing ability to divert attention from shared experiences, takes centre stage. Through these technologies, the experience of youth is transformed into a purely individual and digital experience. However, although I do acknowledge the fears of Lewis and Di Paolantonio – in fact, I agree wholly that we should probably exercise exceeding caution in adopting *more* technology in our classrooms, or daily lives, especially considering that technology's role in appropriating experience is becoming more prevalent– I disagree that these digital technologies cannot offer us a cinematic experience at all.

Importantly, cinematic education is not necessarily tied to literal cinema. Rather, for Lewis and the purposes of this article, cinematic education can happen in those environments in which an object (either digital or physical) is framed in a certain way, similar to how movies are framed, but through distraction, the framed object can be given a different, and importantly educational, role that cannot be preconceived and that resists instrumentalization. For the rest of this essay I will use the example of Belgian youth houses, in order to demonstrate that a cinematic experience remains attainable even when utilizing modern digital technologies.

Youth houses as cinemas

Youth houses in Flanders are somewhat similar to the cinemas of the early 19th century. They are non-mandatory spaces (i.e. attendance is not required), the activities take place in separate spaces away from society, and the experiences in them take place in the free time of the children. In terms of cinematic education: youth houses are literally set apart and experienced in spaces that allow for a collectivizing experience in a specific place, for a particular *duration of time*, with an entrance and exit. Thus, youth houses mark the possibility for distraction to truly emerge and linger. Even in their approach of the digital technology, they do not provide an experience focused on any individual. Instead, if digital technologies are used in youth houses, they are used as a topic of a collective desire for play and distraction. The omnipresence of technology ceases to be an external force dictating demands on the individual child, but rather, it starts bowing down to the whims and rules of play. In other words, the digital realm aligns itself with the temporal, spatial, and collective demands of the youth house, and in doing so, *can* no longer be reduced to individualized time.

To illustrate this point further, let us revisit the example of Mary. While numerous personal devices and technologies are present in this vignette (e.g., the laptop, Instagram, and selfies necessitating mobile phones, and the speakers), one could argue

that these technologies are still distracting. After all, the young people are using their phones to connect with the wider world 'out there'. However, it is worth noting that all of these devices are employed not to connect *individual* youths to the world, but rather to link the symbol of the youth house to *other* youths. In other words, these technological interactions inherently possess the unique potential to gather physical *bodies* (i.e. a physical presence) within the youth house. People come to see Mary because she has a digital presence. Importantly, no one claims Mary as their own *personal* experience. She is something that can only be experienced by being physically present in the collective space of the youth house, and it is through her that a collective digital experience can be shared – it is here that I completely agree with Joris Vlieghe and Yotam Hotam: personal screens cannot replace the physical collectivity of these educational-distracted moments.

In other words, by making Mary the focal point of their technology, the technology itself serves a purpose beyond individual enjoyment. Although I do not deny that the young people derive personal enjoyment from interacting with Mary in this manner, the necessity to convene in a shared space to engage with her means that they are participating in an environment where they willingly allow themselves to be distracted. In essence, by engaging with the statue in this way, a cinematic experience unfolds. However, it is not solely the fact that the young people gather physically through technology and interact with a collective space using technology; it is also the particular philosophy of embracing the present encounter that enables youth work to resist the individualization typically fostered by technology. This resistance is obstinate, precisely because it refuses to take itself too seriously.

Play as obstinacy

From this specific usage of Mary through almost sacrilegious imagery also emerges a form of resistance that I will refer to as **obstinacy** [*Eigensinn*]. I borrow this term from Negt and Kluge (2021), who base themselves on Benjamin's work. For Negt and Kluge, practices never exist in a vacuum. There are consistently different practices that make their own specific demands of youth work. However, Negt and Kluge argue that *from* a specific practice, individuals can create new relations collectively between themselves and in the broader constellation of practices. Yet, this can only happen if practices are self-regulating [*selbstregulierng*].

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is difficult think together and reorient in a practice, when other constellations and other practices keep trying to make their demands from a specific environment. It is in this context that obstinacy emerges. Thus, obstinacy emerges out of bitter need. "It is the protest against expropriation reduced to a single point, the result of the expropriation of one's own senses that lead to the external world." (Negt & Kluge, 2021, p. 292: my translation). In other words, obstinacy is

a resistance to having meaning inserted *before* experience can unfold. That is to say, in the case of cinematic education in youth work, obstinacy is the refusal to have one's collective experience put in the service of any goal other than that of youth work itself. In this sense, obstinacy is the attempt to remain self-regulating as a practice.

In other words, obstinacy is not inherent in a practice itself, but can only occur when this practice collides with the pull of other practices. The obstinacy that then occurs is a refusal to listen to the demands of another practice. This can lead to a self-regulating practice that sustains its own particular environment and demands. It is exactly this refusal in favour of a particular practice that wants to make its *own* demands that Benjamin argued for as well in *The Metaphysics of Youth*.

The ontological power of obstinate resistance of youth lies exactly in being able to experience, without a broader responsibility to learn, or grow up, that which can be offered in an environment in which youths are together. While this obstinacy is indeed a resistance to politicizing forces, it is not necessarily the same as political action. While it is of course possible that this obstinacy transforms into political action, it in the first place facilitates lingering moments of distraction in the present experience in the youth house – it is here that I disagree with Yotam Hotam, as obstinacy as a "de-politicization" movement is exactly the answer that allows youths their *own* investment and responsibilities to their *own* world, instead of being politicized. In other words and to borrow Benjamin's terminology (2011), the potentiality[13] of the educational moments is preserved; The diary is left unread and instead experienced.

Let me again illustrate with the help of the vignette, where this obstinate resistance is rooted in humour. We see this in the youth worker as he explains that Mary lost Her hand. While his first reaction could be defensive, an old and valuable statue was damaged after all, what stays with me in my recollection is the smile with which he said it. A smile that challenged first and foremost my defensive stance to what was valuable about the statue and which instead pushed forward a new kind of resistance to the appropriation of experience. While obstinacy may not be directly political, it does originate from the same need to resist the colonizing forces that seek to eliminate the present experience. While the example of Mary illustrates an important potential for technology to serve as a means of bringing people together in the *present*, it serves a more significant *educational* purpose. Importantly, this is a gathering that is first and foremost obstinate to the seriousness with which one is supposed to take the experience itself – that is now being pushed in policy – in youth houses.

Therefore, in this final segment of my argument, I wish to highlight the potentiality of this present moment with technology to transform the individual and invasive

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[13] Or as Lewis would say the "impotentiality" that happens in the moment of refusal and play (e.g. Lewis, 2014a).

nature of technology into obstinate resistance against the individualization of experience. First, I return to Lewis' reading of Benjamin's cinematic education.

Specifically, Lewis notes that for Benjamin cinema can only truly "thrive if and only if new comedic forms are invented that do not simply reproduce bourgeois life" (Lewis, 2021, p. 159). Benjamin links this to a movement in early Soviet cinema that was so exclusively didactical, that what disappeared was the educational. In other words, and as I have emphasized, what disappeared was the possibility for cinema-goers to be distracted by the cinema. Instead of focusing on a collective present through a shared experience of technology, instead technology only became focused on the world 'out there' (p. 229). Lewis concludes that "[a]t stake here is a cinema that shifts education from conservative attentiveness toward experimental distraction" (pp. 159–169).

What I wish to touch upon is that the technology in the youth house is given a specific *place*. Technology in the youth house has a designated place, which sets it apart from the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of modern technology. When we reconsider much of the criticism about the invasive nature of technology is that it can happen at any time, and more specifically, anywhere. When comparing this to the situation that Benjamin writes about the differences are of course stark. Whereas for the radio and cinema there is only one, often communally used, device that facilitates a certain sharing, most individual devices do not facilitate this. However, in the example we can see that whatever else is afforded to technology, it is given a central place. The music boxes are surrounding the statue, the laptop is under the statue, and any of the pictures taken during a youth work evening always feature Mary as their prime focus. Thus, what this example and this essay capture is that while perhaps technology could be invasive, if it is given a place in which it does not have to be treated as something serious, here is perhaps a hope to integrate it our educational environments as a form of collective distraction in a playful space.

Furthermore, referring back to Benjamin's ideas, youth houses serve as spaces where the potential for play is preserved. It is through these playful interactions that youth work becomes an educational space. In this context, the meaning of interactions is not predetermined, but gains significance in the moment of action. Crucially, this moment of significance can only within the playful and collective atmosphere of the youth house. This is not to say that other spaces cannot facilitate obstinacy, but youth work is particular because it specifically fosters playfulness as its first priority. This goes against the often didactical approach with which we look at childhood – and feeds into Benjamin's ideal of the experience of youth. Furthermore, this moment is cinematic because the personal devices and other digital presences in the youth house, at least in the example, are all used in such a way that they facilitate this fleeting experience. Thus, what these devices capture is not a moment 'out there', but rather a playful and humorous 'here and now'. Ultimately, it is this playful obstinacy that employs technology as a means to share a distracted presence together, manifested in the physical space of the

youth house. This manifestation of playful resistance through a central image makes youth houses an example of cinematic education, demonstrating how such education can serve as a form of obstinate resistance against both purely didactic and a purely distracted approach. Instead, what is formed is a form of distraction that *could* possible allow for a new experience to unfold.

Obstinate cinematic education as an ontological resistance

In wrapping up, let me address a question that may have crossed the minds of readers who are not necessarily interested in protecting youth work as such: why does it matter if youth work serves as a form of obstinate resistance through cinematic education? To shed light on this, we can turn to some final insights of Tyson Lewis (2014b; 2019). Educational discourse – as Gert Biesta (e.g. 2005; 2015) has famously explored in his concept of 'learnification'– has become increasingly enthralled with the dominant notion of learning. While learning itself is not inherently problematic, it becomes a problem when it becomes hegemonic, as the learner" is a specific subject that is (learning) goal-oriented and continuously self-monitoring" (Lewis, 2014b; see also: Masschelein & Simons, 2013). In other words, a very specific, individualistic subject emerges. If we allow this to remain the *only* discourse with which we speak of education, we lose any possibilities to discuss educational issues from a collective and disruptive perspective. Worse yet, we remove any possibilities to have anything unexpected emerge from education. After all, if we have all educational goals written in stone, achieving something outside of them is redundant at best and impossible at worst.

While it might be that the school has a privileged space within fighting this educational discourse – as Joris Vlieghe argues – there's a danger of transforming the profound distractions and ontological power of youth, which Benjamin and Lewis both allude to,[14] into objects of scrutiny within the classroom. Youth and all its distractions might be all to too easily transformed into an object of attention and "[t]o do so would be to miss precisely what is so important about the informal educational experience" (Lewis, 2019, p. 182). Of course, as Lewis also states, "[t]his not so much the fault of teachers who have the best intentions to bring the lived experience of students into the classroom; rather, it is a *structural* feature of schooling as such, which is an institution focused on the cultivation of attentiveness" (Lewis, 2019). Worse yet, perhaps, is the danger of simply *looking for*, or *anticipating* the same unexpected shocks and disruptions that youth work offers within the confines of the classroom, as this risks falling "into the trap of intoxication of mere diversion" (Lewis, 2019). Not only do youth houses allow for a collective distraction through play, these spaces are also not a mere diversion, as I noted in the introduction (Wildemeersch,

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[14] And I have mentioned in my introduction of Lewis' cinematic education.

1997; Torenbosch & Vandenabeele, 2023), they also open up a space of collective and lingering distraction. While in schools something *has* to be put on the table, in the cinematic education of the youth houses does the world *present* itself to the people who are *present*. In other words, it is not about suspending intention to be attentive, it is rather about letting those objects and people who are already *in attendance* (id. present) unfold. It is not unlike putting a movie on a screen and hoping that people will watch. In this case it is the world itself that allows for distraction by projecting itself on the cinema screen.

Youth work, in this sense, straddles the thin line between constant goal-oriented educational environment and mere senseless diversion. While the cultivation of attention is an important part of the formal classroom, in the informal environment of youth work pure attention would be an anathema to the shared cinematic distraction symbolized in the figure of Mary. It is a cinematic distraction originating from the environment of youth work itself. Therefore, youth work is an important space of resistance to many of the neoliberal and noneducational discourses winding their way through education today.

While I cannot argue for any concrete actions to be taken within youth work, – indeed, doing so would be trying to impose order exactly on that what should be left well enough alone – I can argue for the importance of cultivating spaces such as the Flemish youth houses. The reason technology unexpectedly takes centre stage in the vignette is that no preconceived expectations were placed on Mary. Nevertheless, this does not diminish her significance. It is precisely in the moment when she received digital attention that her physical and digital presence acquired a new cinematic meaning. This meaning emerged solely in the act of interaction in the *present*. When we watch a movie we cannot be sure that we will like it, learn from it, will be glued to the screen for its entire runtime, or conversely, that we will hate it, be bored to tears, or be distracted by our friends talking through it. Nevertheless, we cannot be sure that *none* of these things will happen either. In that sense, to borrow from the vignette, we can only wait in an unfolding purgatorial playfulness in which something educational *might* unfold. And, without that purgatorial risk, education would not be quite the same.

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