THE RISE OF DIGITAL DISTANCE LEARNING AND THE ANESTHETIZATION OF YOUTH. DIGITIZATION AND THE CAPACITY FOR REJUVENATING A COMMON WORLD

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Abstract

In this article I deal with an important contemporary issue that should concern all involved in education: the impact of digital technologies on what it means to be young. As I will detail here below, it has become increasingly difficulty for youngsters in our world to act together as a new generation and to counter the ways in which the generations that preceded them have given shape to this world. In the first section I offer a particular interpretation of Hannah Arendt's (1961) ideas on education, which is also based on the early writings of Walter Benjamin (2011). Here I regard 'Youth' as an ontological force that is invariably present and that defines us as humans and as educable beings. Youth is the power to add new beginnings to the world – as evidenced by the many revolutions carried by the young generation during history. In a second part I turn to the recent Pandemic, and more exactly to the unexpected lack of resistance youngsters showed against the harsh restrictions on their lives, at least in some contexts. I explore this phenomenon further in the third section, by analyzing how digitization substantially transmogrifies how we relate to ourselves, others and the world. I make the case, then, that the digitization of school life during the Pandemic has very undesirable effects, which might explain for the inertia the young massively displayed. In a fourth and last section I delve deeper into two different cases where the young actually do revolt against the status quo, so as to flesh out what makes protest into a genuinely Youthful protest. My conclusion is that, for good pedagogical reasons, we would be better most cautious in regard with (further) digitizing education.

Keywords: youth, distance education, COVID-19 pandemic, revolution, Hannah Arendt, Byung-Chul Han.

Youth as an ontological and an educational category

In this article, the very concept of youth is not understood in any psychological, sociological, historical, biological or legal sense, and more generally it should not be taken as an ontic category – a contingent state of being that also could not have existed, or could have existed in a completely different manner. Youth, in the view I defend here, is to be situated at the ontological plane: a potential that is always, invariably and necessarily present, as long as a collective form of human life exists.

A psychological definition would entail that on average people of a certain age are distinct from people of other age groups and that they differ regarding how they look at themselves and the world, what they desire, to which extent they are able to make autonomous decisions, etc. Crucial elements of such a view is that it concerns a stage that comes and should come to an end, and that we can know exactly when adulthood replaces it. From a sociological point of view, one might be interested in youth as a group phenomenon that consists, for instance, of sharing the same worldviews and taste, or behaving and speaking in similar ways – often as a way to distinguish oneself from other age groups, or to stand opposed to them. Historically speaking, youth is scrutinized as having many faces over the centuries, and sometimes it is constructed as a typical modern and even contemporary phenomenon that, for instance, came along the invention of the school apparatus, as Ivan Illich (1995) claims. All these approaches are characterized by the belief that youth can come about and wither away, that it is dependent upon individuals and groups that think, feel, behave, or identify in a specific way, and that it can change dramatically over time.

Over and against such an ontic approach, I suggest to look at Youth as an invariable dimension of what it means to be human: an ontological force of change (Benjamin 2011). That is why I will capitalize this words as from now on. It regards a dimension that is part of human reality and that has a reality of its own. It is thanks to Youth that we are the kind of beings that we are and it is a constitutive part of how we give shape to our life in common. This does not exclude that Youth can be investigated sociologically and psychologically, or that the way Youth exists at a given time and place will be different. My claim is mainly that we can approach Youth at a deeper level, and moreover, that we must do so in order to really capture what education is all about. Youth is also through and through an educational category.

I draw here heavily on the understanding of education as we find it in Arendt's famous essay on this topic (Arendt, 1961). She tries to turn away debates about a school system in crisis from looking at this crisis as one of poor learning outcomes and deficient teaching to a profound ontological understanding of education – an understanding that makes specific claims about what it means to be human, and about the continuation of humanity as such. Crucial to her argument is that a fierce distinction needs to be main-

tained between animals developing into an mature shape and human newborns becoming grown-ups. In the first case, the appearance of a new animal is a purely biological process which demands a certain protection and training on behalf of its progenitors. The aim of this is survival in a double sense: the mere survival of the newborn animal in question, but also the endurance of an existing species as it is genetically programmed. The hyenas of today live exactly the way this species did two millennia back. Identical replication is what is ontologically at stake here. In the case of the arrival of a human being, things could not be more different, and this sets us ontologically apart from the rest of nature. More than a biological event, human birth signifies the opportunity of true newness coming about. Every newcomer possesses the ability to add something completely unforeseen and unforeseeable to reality. More generally, this force of newness, which Arendt also calls natality, is the potential to change our ways of life – as individuals and as a collective: the capacity to start all over again. Because we are creatures of natality our habits can change dramatically over the course of one generation as opposed to non-human animals.

This difference should not be explained away biologically, i.e. as if we have a unique genetic make-up that explains why our comportment knows such an exceptional plasticity, but in terms of a radical break with biology itself. It is this fracture which ontologically characterizes humanity. Whereas animals are never truly new, our potential for newness defines who we are. Moreover, humans are not only always new in terms of alternating with an older generation and differing from them, they are also always new in relation to the world in which they are born. Whereas animals only have a fixed environment to which to adapt and in which to thrive, humans live in a world of meanings: a chain of things they have discovered, named and made – things they deem of importance and for which they are willing to take care. It is at the same time key to the continuation of this world of things we find valuable that it never coincides with itself, and that there is always the possibility of renewal (which dovetails with the horizon of transcendence that is key to Yotam Hotam's argument in his article on Benjamin and Agamben in this issue).

Hence the double task of education. On the one hand, education is fundamentally an intergenerational interaction with the aim of conserving and passing on an already existing world: confronted with newcomers in this world, the elder generation takes up the responsibility to introduce them in it, to make them attentive for it, and to try and show what is meaningful about it. This also comes with making them experience that they are part of one and the same world. On the other hand, this interaction should be conducted in such a way that newcomers are introduced as truly new people, i.e. as creatures that have the capacity to start anew with our common world. To put things differently: on the one hand, a double and most challenging transformation is at work when we educate: children can be transformed by being introduced in an already existing world, e.g. by leaving the family sphere and their immediate interests they happen

to have in everyday life. They can be changed by things in the world for which they have developed an interest. This, on the other hand, also means that they might rejuvenate the existing world by force of their typically human potentiality to add truly new beginnings to the things they care about.

In the research Piotr Zamojski and I conducted on the ontology of the teacher, the first dimension was the central one (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). In this article I am concerned about the second dimension. I want to approach it wholly in ontological terms, i.e. as a the power of starting something truly unanticipated. Moreover, I want to give an account of it in a purified sense: what concerns me is 'the youthness of Youth'. Youth is thus more than the sum of all individual youngsters that happen to be around at a given time. Youth could be characterized by a quality similar to what Heidegger discerns in the authentic work of art: art does not have an origin, because it is origin itself. It should not be seized as something we can unambiguously give a precise place in the history of art (i.e. as a logical consequence of all the artworks that preceded it), because true art makes an unpredictable history – it is a strong event that makes history start again (Heidegger, 1993). Like art, Youth is a phenomenon difficult to handle, as it slips away from every attempt to fix its meaning. Youth is exactly what defies the all too human desire to finally submit reality to a stable, well-established order (which is also the essence of youth according to Benjamin, as discussed in Hotam's article).

Youth, as an inexhaustible force of freshness, novelty and change can therefore be experienced as a source of nuisance. Next to being a marker of hope for a world in need of adjustment, it can also feel as a most dangerous and insurrectionary force, as it may threaten and overthrow existing ways of giving shape to our life in common. That is why the intergenerational relation always has a certain tragic and uncomfortable side to it: the older generation realizes – consciously or not – that the continuation of what they deem of unsurpassable value depends on the newcomers to take it up and to go further with it. Hence they have to recognize that the new generation might refuse to do so. The newcomers might even decide to completely smash the existing world to pieces, to stay utterly indifferent towards it or to make a complete mockery out of it. In the face of Youth every old generation is an extremely vulnerable one.

That there is Youth is a condition that is always present when we live together as human beings. It is something we are inescapably and invariably faced with – in the same sense that we cannot break away from the fact that we have to co-inhabit the world together with people we have not chosen ourselves and who may have quite different views than we ourselves (plurality) and the fact that we will have to pass away some day (mortality). If we like it or not, one must relate to these conditions. In the case of natality, this can translate into taking the educational gesture of welcoming the new generation into an old world so that they can begin anew with it. But – and this is exactly what worries Arendt (1961) so much in her essay on the crisis in education – we might also want to get a hold over this force of newness, and redirect Youth's energies, viz. to

domesticate Youth and to put it at the service of a precisely predefined project of a future we want to secure (as described in Jesse Torenbosch's paper on Flemish youth houses). We then no longer introduce newcomers in an 'old world', i.e. welcome them into a shared world, so that they can rejuvenate it. Rather, we bring them up in function of a 'new world'. We exploit Youth to make our own unfulfilled dreams come true. We tap into this immensely rejuvenating force to realize the political projects we were unable to pursue ourselves as adults. This is, Arendt (1961, p. 177) says, the very basis of totalitarianism. In essence this comes down to forcing a political project upon those that are newcomers to our world. If one has power over Youth, one has power over the future (at least at an ontic level).

We should not only think here of the troubling and fully explicit way in which, historically speaking, education and youth work has been mobilized in order to support dictatorial regimes. In a less overt manner the very same happens when we demand schools to train youngsters with a view of giving a solution to societal problems the older generation has found itself impotent to resolve (Furedi, 2008). For instance, instead of showing the political courage to push through regulations that put a stop to the ecological catastrophes we have caused ourselves, we put our hopes on reshaping the school curriculum so that the new generation will take up responsibility for saving the planet. Buzz words such as ecological literacy and 21st century skills then serve to wash our hands in innocence and to demand from the newcomers to give shape to the future in a way more responsible than adults ever could. This testifies to a capitalist logic which exploits Youth's ingenuity, force of innovation and moral sensitivities, whilst we utterly refuse asking ourselves whether this capitalist logic might be at the origin of the problem itself.

When faced with the demise of democratic ethos, to give another example, our first reflex might consist not so much of questioning our own political responsibility for this apathy towards the common good, but of simply demanding schools to introduce citizenship education on their programs, whilst it is we who are fully defining ourselves what the good citizen is. Newcomers are not being given a chance to rebel against this definition or to formulate new proposals. Hence, we do not welcome them in an old world and do not invite them to go on with this world in their way. Rather, because we feel powerless and are overtaken by cowardice, we act under the assumption that the old world is finished and we cherish the perverse hope that Youth will bring about a new future world we so desperately crave for. Then, we do not offer newcomers a true school life in which they might pick up an interest for things in the world that start mattering to them. Instead, we just pass the buck onto them and ask them to solve our own unsettled issues. We do not educate them for an old world so that they can begin anew, we just try to domesticate and to indoctrinate them in view of a new world.

In a far less dramatic way the same holds when we try to approach youth from a merely psychological, sociological, or historical perspective. Defining, i.e. delimitating and fixating, Youth in terms of a well-defined developmental stage, or in terms of societal roles a group of people has to fulfil never gets at the ontological roots of the power of change. These approaches try to determine and set in stone that what by definition escapes and is opposed to any attempt to finally nail down things. Furthermore, the historical account of youth as a contingent invention that may well disappear one day even seems to be devised to make us forget about the ontological force of Youth. This, however, is not to deny that Youth always runs the risk of dwindling into a state of inertia. Depending on cultural and historical conditions there will be more or less chance at Youth living up or subsiding. This is the topic I deal with in the next sections. More to the point, I will dwell on the response, or the complete lack thereof, in the new generation during the recent Pandemic against the draconic lock-down and school closure measures, and try to trace this strange phenomenon of generalized apathy in the young back to a specific condition, viz. the far-going digitization of their (school) life. The passivity vis-à-vis the enormous and irrational restrictions put on them is telling of the pernicious impact of the digital, which might come with a demise of Youth (at least at the ontic plane).

Adults' and youngsters' response to the Pandemic in Flanders: A case of intergenerational anomaly

It goes without saying that, given my stress on the ontological character of Youth, that such a demise is by definition only temporal. There are always reasons to remain hopeful, and many signs point in that direction. I already mentioned the Youth for Climate Movement which, in spite of the fact that it also shows something about the political cowardice of the adult generation, is a strong case of the insurrectionary power of the new generation: they demand what looks like impossible in the eyes of many adults. Youth, then is the possibility of the impossible. The recent military campaign by the Israeli army in Gaza, causing many youngsters joining on the streets, or occupying public spaces and universities to express their indignation and demanding for a solution for this dire conflict, also seems an occasion that resonates with the anarchic impetus called Youth. In view of this, it is all the more curious that during the Pandemic years this insurgent force was virtually inexistent. After all, it is the young who suffered the most from the disproportionate measures taken to contain the spread of the virus. And yet, no resistance movement emerged that tried to throw of the straitjacket they were forced into. Instead we saw melancholy, obedience, resignation, apathy, despondency, wallowing in doom and dim acceptance of the whole situation

For all clarity, in the following analysis I am concerned with the situation I know best, i.e. the Flemish region, admitting that in other parts of the world the situation

played out differently. Nevertheless, the fact that we witnessed such a total absence of insurrection in a particular part of the world is in and of itself a reason for concern and should be the object of reflection, as it could happen again. It is then important to understand exactly why in one case insurgency takes place and in others not. To detail the case I want to discuss, I give a reading of the situation in Flanders during the Pandemic through an Arendtian lense (cf. Tomas Röhmer's [2002] educational reading of the lockdown). As I see it, what happened was a complete reversal of the roles the adult and the young generations use to play during the educational interaction I detailed in the first section of this article. Young people were forced to lead an already outworn life, typical for the elderly, whereas the adult generation behaved in a 'childish', i.e. immature and irresponsible, manner. The very terms 'senex et puer', old and youthful, taken ontologically, were radically reversed (cf. Hillman, 2005).

So, one part of this intergenerational perversion comes down to the adult generation acting in a neglectful manner, withdrawing themselves from their adult responsibilities vis-à-vis the newcomers. They were spoken to by health experts on the television, backed up by well-meaning politicians, exactly what to do and what not to do, in ways that do not differ from parents reprimanding their unruly teens, or from the priest in the old days preaching from the pulpit. The most incoherent and senseless rules were indicted and swallowed without any counter-act of critique or insubordination. A heading from my newspaper reads: 'Are we allowed to go on vacation again?': a thread of conversation that up till these days was only meaningful in the interaction between a parent and a naughty child. The Belgian minister of health appeared on television to explain in belittling words how many people ('cuddling contacts') we could invite to our household or at least to our balconies, detailing the strict procedures to be obeyed when more than two of those present had to go to the bathroom at the same moment. Again, this eerily reminds of the age we supposedly left behind, in which the manner in which to have sexual intercourse was commanded by the pastor to his flock – having the lights put out, under the blankets, etcetera.

The ease with which critical viewpoints were initially dismissed is also striking in this regards. I refer here to viewpoints that include the negligible infection-fatality rate among young people (Esposito & Principi, 2020), the low transmission rates from asymptomatic carriers, the ineffectiveness of school closures except in cases like influenza where children are particularly vulnerable, the importance of natural immunity and cross-immunity, and the basic immunological understanding that vaccines aimed at creating serologic sterilization do not generate mucosal immunity or prevent transmission, rendering vaccination passports useless (things recognized by some scholars already early on, see Esposito & Principi, 2020). These points were heavily suppressed and systematically labeled as the opinions of ignorant and selfish individuals. This lack of interest in public debate accompanied an unsatiable hunger to be fed, day after day, by frightening yet sensational contamination and mortality figures. Others were more than

keen to blindly follow authority figures, sometimes with great dedication and even deep existential fulfillment. In sum, the elder generation behaved in an irresponsible and highly immature way.

Conversely, the policy of isolating youngsters and depriving them of attending school and normal daily adolescent existence testifies to burdening them with a political responsibility that was not theirs. They had to forsake their youthfulness in view of fighting a war that society had declared against the virus and in view of the chosen weaponization. Securing public health, defined in narrowly medical and statistical terms as the reduction of the number of deaths (even if the average age at which people died from – and mostly with – COVID-19 is above the average age of regular death in the populace), was deemed far more important than caring about Youth and education. The case of Sweden, where the Constitution explicitly forbids school closures, has well demonstrated that taking alternative measures was possible.

The chosen strategies to reduce the spread of the virus turned young people into the exact opposite of Youth: a life grown pale, a washed out and extinguished existence. In the wake of measures such as social distancing in the open air, the shutting down of all leisure and sport activities, decreeing curfews, replacing school life with a substitute that relied on online conferencing software, Youth almost completely faded away: without having the chance to be young and before having had the opportunity to become adults, youngsters were already condemned to the life of elderly people, as if they were locked away in a retirement home. Cut off from any real life physical contact with their peers, they were immobilized in their homes, sitting down all day, or just staying in bed, to consume distance 'education', staring lonely, desperately, mindlessly and mechanically at a screen. Youngsters had to spend their days like old people: they were already living a monotonous existence without any incitements and excitements that could spark an interest in them: they were forced to lead a bleach and dull life that sucked away all energy to do anything meaningful, let alone to try and change something about the horrible situation they were in.

The Impact of digitizing (school) life: anesthetic information solipsism and poverty in experience

Still in keeping with the Arendtian perspective, I have developed in the first section, it is possible to come to an understanding of this bizarre situation by having a closer look at what happened during this period in regards to the very space where the generations normally meet, viz. the school. It is my contention that the demise of Youth, as evidenced by this total passivity displayed by the new generation, is deeply connected to the lack of care we have given to the conditions of their education. Part of the intergenerational anomaly is the absurd belief, which many took for granted, that transitioning

to conference technologies, such as ZOOM or Microsoft Teams, was an adequate substitute for traditional teaching and that it could create the same, or acceptable educational conditions we were used to. This rash and uncaring decision to digitize teaching and learning, however, comes at a high cost, as I will detail here below. To be clear, my analysis does not concern the digital per se. Undoubtedly there exist digital technologies that support the educational interaction between the generations in beneficial ways (cf. Bayne et al., 2020) and that are not subject to the objections I discuss in this section. What I want to target here is the impact of generally applied distance education mediated by conference tools. And I do this especially, because for some exactly this is what the education of the future should look like. In Flanders, for instance, it is now decreed that schools can – and many do – deliver classes online one day a week. According to the recently adapted WHO regulations, school closures and distance education are two of the prescribed core measures to deal with next pandemics. Scrutinizing the effects of digital distance education is therefore of paramount importance.

In view of the ease with which some tend to go along this trend, it is ironic to observe that the idea that traditional schools are modelled after the prison and designed to break children's willpower and to discipline their bodies so that they become utterly passive, yielding and unresisting creatures the capitalist production system is in need of – the well-known Foucauldian line of critique that for so many decades has been brought forward by progressive educationalists (e.g. Deacon, 2005) – has now to a certain degree become reality. After all, ZOOM-education means that one needs to be punctually at home in order to mindlessly consume distant lectures, staring in loneliness at a screen and being unfailingly watched by a panoptic or synoptic gaze – as one's existence is being reduced to a face imprisoned in a small box on the computer screen. The only remaining means of resistance consists of switching the screen off and this comes down to digital annihilation[1].

Being the hostage of screen conferencing technologies comes with the loss of certain experiences that are educationally of the highest importance (Cf. Vlieghe, 2022). First, from an Arendtian point of view (Arendt, 1961; cf. Friesen, 2022) it makes all the difference whether we find ourselves physically at home or at school. The school is not a random place that can be replaced by any other environment (Masschelein & Simons, 2013). Children literally have 'to go to school', i.e. they have to make an effort and sometimes suffer bad weather, overcrowded bus services, etc. to leave behind the sphere

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[1] I acknowledge, following what I said about digital technologies other than conferencing software that allow for educationally speaking interesting applications, that also during the Pandemic lockdowns people have experimented in artful ways with the media they had to rely on. This underlines the ontological claim that even under the most restraining conditions a Youthful response is possible. However, it concerns rather limited experiments and this observation does not invalidate the claim I make here about the majority of youngsters that did not respond in this way.

of the household – so as to find themselves somewhere else, i.e. in a potentially less cozy building, together with many strangers, or at least people they have not chosen to be with themselves. This facilitates the experience that one is at school, not as a unique human being with one's own highly personal desires, learning needs and care needs, but as a student, i.e. as a member of the new generation. The message being passed on is thus that schooling, i.e. showing that there is a common world and that there are things of interest in that world, is meant for everyone belonging to the new generation. As Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2013) put it sharply: the idea that school is for everyone, means first and foremost: it is for nobody in particular.

Going to school therefore entails that individual children are given the opportunity to deeply experience themselves as more than family members or private individuals, i.e. as members of one generation, and moreover of the new generation (cf. Hotam's analysis of atomization in this issue). Arguably, attending school makes this happen more likely than listening to the same music or going to the same places to spend their free time (which is a point on which I probably disagree with Torenbosch's contribution). In the last cases, youngsters are again addressed as people with a fixed identity, e.g. a certain taste they happen to have. On the contrary, when they are addressed as students, they may distance themselves from their spontaneous life world, encounter up till then unknown parts of the world and pick up and develop new interests. And, when they are addressed as representatives of the new generation at school, youth – the ontological force of adding new beginnings to our common world – stands a chance to emerge. However, when school education gets substituted with generally applied teaching and learning at home, all this becomes impossible. Falling back on individualizing technologies the education process is reduced to an individual learning trajectory without any deeper (inter)generational meaning. In such conditions Youth cannot come to fruition.

Second, in order to find oneself among others who belong to the same youthful generation, it is vital to join together in real life and not sitting alone behind a screen. One cannot truly have a meeting on-line that can be properly called an encounter, an experience of being-together (Friesen, 2021). After all, when the screen mediates between ourselves and another, it is impossible to look each other in the eye: the camera is always placed in such a way that one has to face a spot just above the screen, so it is utterly impossible to focus one's eyes on the screen and the camera at the same time. The super-fast pace with which question and answer alternate – which is the basis of normal communication and connection between those who are part of the same conversation – is constantly disrupted by long pauses, or by people chattering at the same time. Instead of being able to really listen to each other, the most important thing we experience, again and again, is that we are not in the same place and that we do not really speak to each other. The absence of a fellow student, which is so tangible in a physical classroom, because we can not miss noticing an empty space, is experienced completely

differently compared to when someone is not logged onto the platform. The contagious laughter that students (and teacher) can fall prey to together does not occur online or if it happens, it feels completely different (cf. the similar analysis Torenbosch presents regarding the role of humor in youth houses).

We may be visually 'united' in some way, but we never share one acoustic space, which is a constant reminder that we are not actually together. Suddenly we hear the dog barking 'at someone's house' through our own loudspeakers while we are in the digital lesson, or someone starts to speak visibly without having the microphone on: annoying experiences that mainly communicate that there simply is no being-together (cf. Blumsztajn et al., 2022). We are constantly thrown back onto ourselves. An yet, we are also constantly stimulated to seek real physical contact with each other. These attempts, however, are permanently broken off. Subconsciously we respond to each other's perceived presence, we yearn for contact, but our efforts are continuously thwarted, even though we keep trying – on an instinctive level. It explains the excruciating exhaustion we experience while attending distance learning.

Holding a plea for using conference technologies thus testifies to a lack of understanding of the ecological aspects of school life. Those who go along with this trend fail to see how the school architecture operates, viz. that it is designed to make possible real encounter, intergenerational interaction and the experience of being part of the generation of newcomers. They confuse students made of flesh and blood with disembodied learners that can be educated everywhere and independent of any context. Experts and policy-makers that are keen on screen-based learning seem to have little sense of place and of the somatic aspect of what it means to be a student (cf. Citton, 2016). In that sense, the ease with which distance learning was introduced on a world-scale and the zeal with which some defend it as the new standard speaks to a far-going desomatization of the society in which we live (cf. Vlieghe et al., 2012).

This forgetfulness about the body is in line with a third worrying contemporary phenomenon which explains the enormous attraction screens and screen education exert over some of us. The screen is not only a technology to put something on display and hence to disclose a world, it could be argued that the screen also keeps us at an easy, comfortable and safe distance from the world, immunizes us against being touched and potentially being transformed by this world, and hence – conforming to its etymological roots – screens off from a meaningful encounter with the world (Agamben, 2016), not only locking us up in the sphere of the household, but more importantly, in the sphere of individual existence enclosed upon itself. As Mauro Carbone has shown, the old metaphor of the window on the world which might help to explain, phenomenologically, how we experience paintings (viz. as if we were looking through the frame to something behind the canvas) no longer holds in case of the screen. We do not have the feeling to be transported to somewhere else (Carbone, 2015). This experience has heavily aggravated due to the invention and spread of hand-held devices: without interruption and

independent from where we are, we can stare at a screen that we hold firmly in the palm of our hand. Two senses synaesthetically merge – touch and sight. What I see is also what I grasp (Cooley, 2004). What I see is immediately felt as mine. I have it here and now in my possession. The fact that some are able to pay a visit to a museum without actually looking and studying the works of art, but just walk through it and make photographs of everything, just to have it in their possession, i.e. on their smart phones which are always at their disposal, testifies to the radical immanent relation between user and screen: there is nothing outside anymore. This screen does not disclose the world anymore, it destroys the very idea of a common world out there.

So far, I have identified three alarming and highly anti-educational tendencies that come with carelessly relying on screen technologies: a far going individualization and loss of the experience of belonging to a (new) generation, the demise of physical contact and more generally a kind of body amnesia, as well as a complete redefinition of our relation to the world as a totally immanent and self-enclosed affair. All this can be summarized as the emergence of a form of anesthetic information solipsism and poverty in experience (cf. De Sutter, 2017; Han, 2022). Taking in what appears on the screen is no longer something that might have a substance and a value of its own, for instance symbolized by the weight of the book we read through. Rather, it is felt to be just information. As Iain Thompson (2005) has analyzed, the things that we have in front of our eyes are only there to be used, stored, deleted, multiplied, to be cut up and pasted: resources that serve the highly personal needs and desires of the user. Recorded 'lessons' are a case in point: giving completely in to the desire for a complacent and self-centered life, 'students' can choose which parts to watch and which ones not, at normal speed or double speed, etc. The risk of being bored for one second has been cast out from reality. This is antithetical to what a student must experience to be a genuine student: as Otto Friedrich Bollnow puts it, in order to be educated we must undergo a forceful and sometimes painful encounter ('Begegnung') with an aspect of reality that remains external to who we are, and that therefore has the power to transform us (Guardini & Bollnow, 1965). Friction and discomfort are thus essential. Only then we can have meaningful transformational experience. With the screenification of our lives, this category of experience-as-friction is on the brink of disappearing (cf. Baricco, 2020). People of the screen suffer a poorness in true experience: they are condemned to become an anesthetic generation. No longer can they be touched and significantly changed. They are locked up and locked away in a hedonistic universe, which is centered around comfort, safety and pain-avoidance. The result is an ongoing re-affirmation of the self, without any possible confrontation with something unforeseen that might bring newness to their lives and to the world. Under digital conditions of education what takes place is a total and totalitarian immunization against formative experience and newness in the name of safety and comfort.

Byung-Chul Han (2021) captured this new life condition very precisely in his book on the 'palliative society': today we are prone to generalized algophobia. We have forgotten that pain is an essential dimension of leading a meaningful human life, individually and collectively speaking. It is pain that teaches us what is of importance (e.g. when we lose it). It is the pain people suffer in common which incites them to take action, acknowledging the social dimension of pain. Instead, today pain gets redefined as an individual and medical issue that needs to be treated and sedated (cf. De Sutter, 2017). And ideally it gets completely eradicated, so that humans, as completely atomized individuals, can lead the life that Nietzsche described as that of the 'last men': a superficial existence where nothing can touch and change us, but were comfort and safety have become the sole and highest values.

Youth and revolution: signs of both despair and hope

By way of intermediate conclusion, I have argued that the digital comes with particular effects regarding how we relate to ourselves, others and the world: the digital goes hand in hand with a strong tendency towards privatization, desomatisation and avoidance of friction and discomfort, which profoundly hinders the possibility to have a true experience of a common world and of a world 'outside', with which we might collide and which might transform us. The digital also works against the experience of belonging to a generation and hence to belonging to a new generation as distinct from the older one. As such, the massive and unthinking introduction of digital distance education, when supported by conference technologies to be used alone at home, jeopardizes education, understood as an interaction between generations in which the newcomers are introduced in a shared world to which they may add new beginnings. The ontological force of Youth, i.e. making the impossible possible, the power to stand up against an existing order and to think and act in completely new ways, gets severely imperiled too. It is no coincidence to me that the most recent symptom of the demise of Youth, the total lack of protest of youngsters in Flanders against their deplorable locked-down situation and hence they being condemned to live an pale and insensate existence, happens under conditions of far-going digitization of school life and of life in general.

On the other hand, this regards regrettable conditions and not a final and irreversible collapse. As I mentioned, in the post-COVID-19 era there are signs of hope that Youth might resurface. I named the involvement in the demonstrations and actions against the military operations in Gaza as a case in point. Many will undoubtedly add other struggles to this, such as the protests, typically carried by young people, in the name of social justice. I have in mind here the Black Lives Matter movement, the many students' protests against curricula at their universities that privilege a particular western worldview at the cost of people with other background, indigenous people and the victims of an ongoing western industrial and cultural neocolonialism, and the LGBTQIA+

community that rises up against traditional ideas about sex and gender that they experience as highly oppressive. In all these cases young people choose to engage in a battle against grave injustices and their target is mainly the elder generation that is still attached to old ways of thinking about how to give shape to individual and collective life and that needs to be waked up. They need to be told how bad the situation is and what their part is in maintaining all these forms of oppression.

I want to conclude this article by carefully distinguishing both forms of protest and insurrection, i.e. the anti-war initiatives as opposed to what is often labeled WOKE, as in both cases rallying against violence and oppression plays out in two fundamentally distinct ways. The WOKE movement in fact perfectly dovetails with the current tendency towards privatization, desomatisation and avoidance of friction and discomfort. In that sense I do not regard this as an expression of the force of Youth. On the contrary.

It goes without saying that what WOKE stands for is completely new: what this movement demands and fights for is unforeseen and not in line with the dominant ways of living of the elder generation. Yet, it could be argued that in this case newness is again domesticated and toned down, because in the end this movement only reinforces extreme individualization, far-going body amnesia, radical self-enclosure and the loss of a common world. Whereas social justice demands used to be about the recognition of a common human dignity and the call for equal opportunities and treatment in spite of identifying markers such as class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, race, religious beliefs, etc., justice is now reduced to the absolute respect for idiosyncratic identities that multiply by the day. The demand of the Civil Rights Movement was, essentially, that it does not matter whether Rosa Parks is white, black or for that matter purple of skin. Markers should remain in the background. The pursuit of the WOKE movement, on the contrary, is the realization of a society in which the background becomes the foreground: it concerns an extreme and extremist form of identity-politics which aims at unique societal rights and benefits depending on the characteristics one happens to have, like skin colour, or chooses to have, such as gender (cf. Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

There is only one trait this almost infinite multitude of identity groups has in common: they are all and without exception victims (and more specifically victims of a western, white, heteronormative and colonialist elite). The world is what oppresses them, and the erroneous conclusion drawn from this idea is that we have to destroy the world in order to definitely overcome victimization. History has to be rewritten so as to be able to conduct a safe life: textbooks in philosophy have to get rid of references to male supremacists like Hume or Kant. Any piece of cinema that potentially might emotionally hurt or morally upset a student can no longer be shown or used as study material: universities increasingly tend to look as if they were day care centres for young adults. As one of my students called for in a recent exam essay: so as no longer to be mis-

gendered, non-binary students should have the right to be taught by non-binary lecturers. What happens here is, in Arendtian terms: reforming that what exists in view of a new world instead of caring about an existing world. This is, as Arendt argued (Arendt, 1961, p. 177), the seed of totalitarianism. It puts an end to the possibility of educational transaction, intergenerationally understood. The new world WOKE strives for in fact incapacitates the young generation to experience a common world. The rest is so many identity groups living in their own heads: individuals living in their own individual bubble – alone, me myself, with my screen in my hands. Digitization is the ultimately wished-for partner-in-crime for those who identify as WOKE victims.

As I wrote, the appeal of screen technologies resonates with the wish to shut off any painful confrontation with the world out there, with an immunization against anything that might hurt or urge us to transform our lives, with the wish of being in full command over our own private world, with enjoying absolute comfort and security, with being a creature that has a will, but not a body. The world and our bodies are mere instruments we can and should manipulate to have it our way. If I choose and dream up to identify as a woman, I am a woman. As Jean-François Braunstein wittingly remarks:

> For the first time in history we are being faced with a radical solipsism, which not only claims that only consciousness exists, but also that consciousness fabricates the world. This solipsism, then, becomes a mass illusion, encouraged by the development of virtual life (Braunstein, 2022, p. 150, transl. JV).

The reality is no longer that we are born in a body; as from now our gendered being is just our own fabrication – no matter how absurd the chosen life project might be. The desomaticized condition of consuming the world solely through the screen backs all this up without the slightest friction.

The claim that we acknowledge no matter what identity one prefers precede over any claim to reality or the requirement to live in a common world. Wokeism, in the end, is nothing, but anesthetic solipsism and poverty in formative experience, which deprives the young generation of really being Youthful. When push comes to shove, this reductive understanding of what it means to be young fully dovetails with the neoliberal organization of our contemporary societies. Wokeism is above all 'Woke Capitalism' (Rhodes, 2021): honestly believing that they achieve true emancipation and more equity by putting forward idiosyncratic stylizations of life as political demands, WOKE militants just play into the hands of exploitative economical moguls that have made the selling of their lifestyles into their main business model. The victims-turned-heroes that appear in commercials for posh clothing lines and trendy gadgets have by definition become gender fluid. This changes absolutely nothing about the fate of the 15 percent of children being faced with struggling to make ends meet day in, day out, in an affluent society such as my own country, and the fact that millions of them die from lack of decent food, water supplies and basic hygiene facilities, or are being forced into child labour and prostitution, in places we just do not bother about. On the contrary. We end

up with a complete appropriation of western Youth by the conservative forces of the capitalist order, firmly in the saddle as it was before. Wokeism is the exact opposite of contributing to a profound change and rejuvenation of our common world.

It is in that regard a sign of hope that many belonging to the young generation today rise their voices against the background of the dire situation in Gaza. I want to argue that this is an interesting case to contrast to the WOKE movement, which I do not regard as a genuinely Youthful protest. That we see Youth resurface precisely in the other case has to do with some features of named resistance which stand antithetically opposed to what we see happening in the case of WOKE. The indignation which fuels this Youthful protest is caused by the outrageous amount of physical violence involved in this conflict. In view of this horror it is no longer possible to deny that our humanity, and moreover our common humanity, is bound to the fact of having and sharing bodies that are equally vulnerable and that can be hurt in the same horrendous ways (cf. Butler, 2004). The outcry for stopping this violence happens in the name of humanity and concerns a cause that reaches out far beyond the limits of the individual enclosed upon itself, i.e. a cause outside of our own individual concerns that has the force to appeal to the protesters. They share a world in common with the oppressed. All this stands diametrically opposed to the resentful revendication by individuals who claim an absolute respect for their idiocyncratic or self-fabricated identity.

Moreover, what is at stake here is the lessening of extreme forms of pain. However, rather than denying the body, and hence denying the 'truth of pain' and treating pain as an individual and medical issue to be sedated and treated, the felt pain is a collective one which comes with a political message: we simply cannot tolerate the situation any longer and have to take action (Han, 2021). Pain is not what we want to get rid of at a merely individual level. Instead, by taking it most seriously it becomes a political issue and a cause for a just fight in which the young generation holds the elder generation responsible for what is wrong in the world. Next to this, this collective action in turn demands physical encounters. Most likely this has to do with the highly individualizing characteristics of digital technologies as outlined in this article. Even if social media are today inevitable in getting the protests in question organized, it is clear that they do not suffice. It is also vital, it seems, that people physically gather for a political momentum to come about (cf. Cavarero, 2021). Flesh-and-blood encounter which allows for sharing one's outrage is essential.

In conclusion, the comparison of both cases warrants optimism, but also calls for cautiousness, especially for those involved in the education of the next generation. As educators we should not senselessly go on with digitizing further what we do at school. We stand to lose a lot if we allow the forces of the digital to take control over the educational transaction between old and young in relation to a shared world that can touch us and change us. We might gain in terms of comfort and from the point of view of practical and organizational affairs, but then we pay the price of contributing to raising

a generation that no longer seems to live in a shared world, that lives a sedated existence of pure immanent self-enclosure and that is no longer able to add true new beginnings to our world. Dealing responsibly with this issue is the greatest challenge and responsibility we face as educators today.

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