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BEYOND CAPACITY: EXAKTE PHANTASIE AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF EDUCATIONAL NORMATIVITY

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Abstract

This article argues for rethinking education in the Anthropocene as a site for reconfiguring subjectivity, rather than a reactive response to crisis. Framing the climate crisis as an aesthetic and phenomenological challenge, following Scott Hamilton and Dipesh Chakrabarty, it explores how ontological insecurity undermines the imagination of alternative futures. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of planetarity, the article proposes an ethical and epistemological shift beyond universalizing frameworks, foregrounding alterity and contingency as central to educational thought. The argument develops through Theodor W. Adorno's negative dialectics and his notion of education after Auschwitz, offering a model of negative normativity grounded in critical reflection on historical rupture and epistemic limits. Central to this is Adorno's concept of *exakte Phantasie*, reimagined here as a pedagogical practice of receptive and speculative imagination. As a form of *ars inveniendi*, it fosters critical hope and imaginative agency within conditions of ecological and ontological uncertainty. Adorno's critical and material reconceptualization of imagination, I argue, offers a new – performative – interpretation of aesthetic education, which is attuned to address contemporary socioeconomical and ecological challenges.

Keywords: : Aesthetic Education, Phantasie, Adorno, imagination

Oltre la capacità: Exakte Phantasie e la riconfigurazione della normatività educativa

Questo articolo sostiene la necessità di ripensare l'istruzione nell'Antropocene come luogo di riconfigurazione della soggettività, piuttosto che come risposta reattiva alla crisi. Inquadrando la crisi climatica come una sfida estetica e fenomenologica, seguendo Scott Hamilton e Dipesh Chakrabarty, esplora come l'insicurezza ontologica minacci l'immaginazione di futuri alternativi. Attingendo al concetto di planetarità di Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, l'articolo propone un cambiamento etico ed epistemologico che va oltre i modelli universalizzanti, mettendo in primo piano l'alterità e la contingenza come elementi centrali del pensiero educativo. L'argomentazione si sviluppa attraverso la dialettica negativa di Theodor W. Adorno e la sua nozione di educazione dopo Auschwitz, offrendo un modello di normatività negativa fondato sulla riflessione critica sulla rottura storica e sui limiti epistemici. Al centro di tutto ciò c'è il concetto di Adorno di exakte Phantasie, qui reimmaginato come pratica pedagogica di immaginazione

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ricettiva e speculativa. Come forma di ars inveniendi, essa promuove la speranza critica e l'azione immaginativa in condizioni di incertezza ecologica e ontologica. La riconcettualizzazione critica e materiale dell'immaginazione di Adorno, sostengo, offre una nuova interpretazione – performativa – dell'educazione estetica, in sintonia con le sfide socioeconomiche ed ecologiche contemporanee.

Parole chiave: Educazione estetica, Phantasie, Adorno, immaginazione

1. ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY AND THE CRISIS OF EDUCATIONAL FUTURITY

In the context of the Anthropocene, political theorist Scott Hamilton observes, society faces a paradox. Anthropogenic climate change diagnoses a human condition as a state of crisis that at once assumes deep entanglement with nature and insurmountable alienation from it. This dual character generates «ontological insecurity», an «existential discontinuity, in which humanity must secure itself in the future from itself in the present». [1] This paradox paralyzes meaningful action, despite widespread calls to address looming environmental and societal crises. Moreover, Dipesh Chakrabarty deepens this diagnosis, arguing that these contradictions arise from an inability to subjectively experience the environment as a space for tangible action. He emphasizes that «the mode of being in which humans collectively may act as a geological force is not the mode of being in which humans—individually and collectively—can become conscious of being such a force.»[2]. Hence, before such problems can be framed politically, changes to life-supporting planetary systems need to be addressed as phenomenological and aesthetic challenges.

This double bind often leads to calls for increased societal awareness and environmental responsibility, positioning education as a primary means of addressing the climate crisis.[3]. As a result, reimagining education has become central to contemporary debates in theory and policy.[4]. As observed by Anette Gough, a consensus shared among both policy makers and academics is that education needs to be perceived less as an instrument for securing sociocultural reproduction and transmission of existing knowledge and more as a catalyst for social and cultural change. Education in the Anthropocene, Gough writes, «needs to be socially reconstructive and transformative – business as usual and social reproduction in a neo-liberal and neo-conservative agenda will not work as society and our environment has changed so much.» [5]at the start of the nuclear age, or some other time, both earlier and later than these dates. The term itself is also contentious because of its humanist and human supremacy focus, and the way it hides troublesome differences between humans (including gender and cultural differences

Critics, however, argue that framing education reactively can erode futural imagination by subsuming «ontological categories like time, space, possibility, and experience into the penumbra of crisis», thereby intensifying ontological insecurity and contributing to what Graham B. Slater describes as a «social ontol-

[1] S. Hamilton, „Securing Ourselves from Ourselves? The Paradox of "Entanglement" in the Anthropocene", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 68, nr. 5, 2017, p. 580.

[2] D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, University of Chicago Press 2021, p. 185.

[3] See UNESCO Changing Minds, Not the Climate: The Role of Education. 2017 and Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO Publishing, 2020.

[4] For a broader analysis, see A. Pocius, 'Education as Performative Contradiction: Limits (And Possibilities) of Subjectification in the Anthropocene', *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia,* 53, Vilnius University 2025, pp. 42–56.

[5] A. Gough, 'Education in the Anthropocene', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, by Annette Gough, Oxford University Press, 2021. "plainCitation":"Annette Gough, 'Education in the Anthropocene', in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education, by Annette Gough (Oxford University Press, 2021

ogy of crisis». As a result, education risks producing precarious subjectivities rather than opening spaces for new possibilities.[6]

Further, commenting on Greta Thunberg's vocal protests against perceived irresponsibility of adults, Toscano and Quay highlight the risk that education, when reduced to a tool for managing crisis, becomes a form of indoctrination—imposing a «new world order» saturated with the assumptions and failures of the old. They stress that such an approach not only robs the young of their role in inaugurating the truly new but substitutes their unique potential for renewal with an illusory future modeled on the past. These "novel" visions—whether utopian or dystopian—risk becoming a fait accompli, foreclosing the disruptive and spontaneous possibilities intrinsic to youth's role as newcomers to the world.[7]

Education scholar Anna-Katrina Holfelder identifies a similar contradiction at the heart of contemporary educational discourse: the belief that a sustainable future can be secured through proper education coexists with a deep societal conviction that the future is both unpredictable and predetermined. Both conventional and 'progressive' models of environmental education, she argues, fail to foster subjective determination and responsibility, as they impose a foreclosed sense of futurity. As she writes, in both cases, the future is not understood as open or shaped by human actions. Education becomes an instrument for attaining predetermined objectives, contradicting the ideals of self-determination and openness[8]. For Holfelder, climate change and the neoliberal instrumentalization of education together undermine the normative core of educational ideals, particularly those of subjectification, citizenship, responsibility, and freedom. This fosters detachment and disillusionment, making it harder for students to see their future as something they can actively shape.

In this context, as jan jagodzinski suggests, «education is in need of some serious fabulation»[9]. Contemporary education confronts ambiguous experiences of societal and environmental alterity, without the shelter of normative frameworks that might dispel these ambiguities. I argue that in order to foster a meaningful sense of futurity, education must be reconceived not as a response to crisis, but as the site where subjectivity itself is reconfigured. In the aftermath of the Anthropocene, historically central ideas of subject formation—reason, autonomy, and freedom—have become partially unstable. They can no longer retain their normative authority when faced with such contradictory experience. In this light, rethinking subjectification becomes a pedagogical imperative—not as a pre-defined *telos*, but as an open-ended negotiation of limits and possibilities. The challenge, then, is to resist what Debbie Sonu calls «a momentary ethics temporarily satisfied through contained activity and manipulation».[10] Instead, pedagogy must become, as Carrie Campbell suggests, «a field of discourse that allows us to pose critical questions and actions that reframe and reinterpret freedom and agency in the face of the 'limits and limitations' imposed on us through the Anthropocene». [11]

[6] G. B. Slater, 'Education as Recovery: Neoliberalism, School Reform, and the Politics of Crisis', *Journal of Education Policy* 30, no. 1, 2015, p. 7.

[7] M. Toscano and J. Quay, '"How Dare You!" When an Ecological Crisis Is Impacted by an Educational Crisis: Temporal Insights via Arendt', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55, no. 10, 2023, p. 1143.

[8] Anne-Katrin Holfelder, *Towards a Sustainable Future with Education?*, in *"Sustainability Science"* 14, no. 4, 2019, p. 944.

[9] J. Jagodzinski, *The Precarious Future of Education: The Speculative Fictions of Education* in Jan Jagodzinski, ed., *Precarious Future of Education: Risk and Uncertainty in Ecology, Curriculum, Learning, and Technology*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 3.

[10] Debbie Sonu and Nathan Snaza, *The Fragility of Ecological Pedagogy: Elementary Social Studies Standards and Possibilities of New Materialism*, in "Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy" 12, no. 3, 2015, p. 273,

[11] C. Campbell, *The Anthropocene Subject and Emancipation: The Challenge of "Emancipatory" Pedagogy in an Era of Climate Crisis* in Nataša Lacković et al. (ed by), *Rethinking Education and Emancipation: Diverse Perspectives on Contemporary Challenges*,

Inevitably, this reimagining requires, as David A. Greenwood writes, revising our «guiding metaphors, that suggest what is real and important, what counts and does not count, what is worth knowing, and how knowledge itself should be approached».[12] Kristupas Sabolius offers one such intervention by shifting from the concept of environment—predicated on stable epistemological structures that privilege the human—toward the dynamic notion of milieu. As he writes, «The concept of milieu encompasses dynamism and a creative moment, suggesting that the milieu itself is never given as a stable or defined structure: it requires the recognition and enacting of relationality. »[13] Drawing on Simondon, Sabolius identifies the Anthropocene as the experience of an alienated milieu—a loss of relationality that impoverishes the capacity to perceive one's surroundings as a horizon for action and receptivity.

In this light, subjectification is neither a teleological formation toward self-identity nor its dissolution into distributed agencies. In education, it becomes a rearticulation of subjective closure as a site of openness towards the milieu – a relational practice of negotiating what Gert Biesta calls «qualified freedom». Existentially, he describes this as a perpetual effort of remaining in the difficult «middle ground» between withdrawal and engagement, where at one end we encounter the risk of world-destruction; at the other – self-destruction.[14]

Cary Wolfe furthers this argument: «The very thing that separates us from the world connects us to the world, and self-referential, autopoietic closure… is generative of openness to the environment». Limits do not enclose subjectivity but enable new forms of relationality. As Wolfe writes, «closure increases, by constituting elements more capable of being determined, the complexity of the environment that is possible for the system»[15].

Framed thus, a rearticulation of subjective closure underwrite both actual and virtual possibilities for acting within the associated milieu, while educational subjectification can be understood as a critique of human capacity: recognizing that our capacities simultaneously constitute our limitations. This frames the experiential challenge of the Anthropocene as an aesthetic one—what Tom Huhn describes as «the capacity to liberate ourselves continuously from the very faculties that, paradoxically, constitute us»[16].

This rethinking of subjectification necessitates reconsidering the normative content of education's guiding concepts: freedom, responsibility, and agency. These must emerge from within aesthetic and relational complexities rather than from pre-given ideals. In what follows, I turn to Gayatri Spivak's critique of globality and her notion of planetarity to explore how aesthetic entanglement with alterity and contingency might reconfigure subjective agency. I then return to Adorno's negative dialectics to develop exakte Phantasie as a rigorous pedagogical practice—one that fosters imaginative, responsible action in the Anthropocene.

Palgrave Studies in Educational Philosophy and Theory, Cham: Springer International Publishing 2024, p. 93.

[12] D. A. Greenwood, *Culture, Environment, and Education in the Anthropocene* in *Assessing Schools for Generation R (Responsibility)*, ed. Michael P. Mueller, Deborah J. Tippins, and Arthur J. Stewart, vol. 41, Contemporary Trends and Issues in Science Education, Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands 2014, p. 283.

[13] K. Sabolius, *How Can We Learn from Milieus?*, "Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia" 53 2025: p. 13.Humphreys and Blenkinsop (2017

[14] G. Biesta, *Risking Ourselves in Education: Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification Revisited*, "Educational Theory" 70, no. 1 (February 2020): p. 97.

[15] C. Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, Posthumanities Series, v. 8, University of Minnesota Press 2010, p. 21.

[16] T. Huhn, *Aesthetic Education, Human Capacity, Freedom*, in N. Ross (Ed.), *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory.* (pp. 177–179). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 178

2. FROM GLOBALITY TO PLANETARITY: RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL NORMS

In her essay *Imperative to Reimagine the Planet*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak criticizes the concept of globality, arguing that it creates the illusion that cultural, political, and economic contradictions can be subsumed under a single denominator and managed within a homogeneous matrix of abstract space. Unlike material geographical and social parameters, globality is structured through networks of global exchange and information flows, which are not neutral but reduce social and cultural differences to a centralized system of control. Spivak illustrates this by stating: «The globe is on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank. No one lives there; and we think that we can aim to control globality. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, indeed are it.»[17]

As a totalizing image, globality does not simply define external space but shapes possible experiences and subjective relations to the world. It imposes a fixed framework on pragmatic, ethical, and cultural possibilities, particularly in relation to otherness — whether marginalized communities, non-human entities, or forces of nature and technology beyond human scale. Like the slogan "think globally, act locally," it assumes a part-whole relation in which each part is identical in relation to the whole, while the whole remains abstract.

As a counterpoint, Spivak proposes to rewrite the globe as a planet[18]. Unlike the conceptually closed system of globality, which seeks total comprehension, the planet functions as a radical horizon of alterity—politically and ethically engaged yet irreducible to a single epistemic framework. The planet is fragmented, uneven, and materially conditions different subjective perspectives, making it impossible to be rationalized under a universal definition. Spivak contrasts planetary being with global agency:

> If we imagine ourselves as planetary accidents rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us, it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away-and thus to think of it is already to transgress, for, in spite of our forays into what we metaphorize, differently, as outer and inner space, what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous.[19]

Because planetarity resists being fully assimilated into dominant epistemic structures, it forces an engagement with the limits of perception and knowledge. In education, this has crucial implications. Planetarity neither affirms nor negates global epistemology. Instead, it reterritorializes it. It disrupts its inherited oppositions such as universal/particular, center/periphery, and self/other. Spivak's perspective does not prescribe new universal principles but instead enables a questioning of how educational models sustain epistemic structures and how they might be rethought.

This shift is particularly relevant to aesthetic education, which does not seek to resolve contradictions but rather to develop the capacity to engage with their complexity. Rather than a new normative system, planetarity serves as a regulative idea for rethinking categories like justice, freedom, and responsibility. Put more forcefully, it requires an aesthetic education oriented towards «an epistemological change that will

[17] G. C. Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 338.
[18] Ibid.
[19] G. C. Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, p. 339.

rearrange desires»[20]. If globality presumes a homogeneous knowledge system, planetary thinking requires a pedagogy that sustains epistemological uncertainty, questioning the very frameworks through which meaning is constructed[21].

Spivak's concept of freedom reflects this shift. She rejects the idea of freedom from responsibility and instead redefines freedom as the right to assume responsibility[22]. This marks a departure from abstract notions of rights and places responsibility in a concrete relationship to alterity — a capacity to respond without reducing the other to one's own epistemic structures. This resonates with Gert Biesta's idea that subjectivity in education is not about asserting autonomy but about recognizing the conditions that shape freedom itself. If we are to engage with planetary thinking, we must ask: How can we assume the limits that define us and recognize them as conditions for collective action, cultural self-determination, and coexistence?

This question highlights not only the critical potential of aesthetic education but also its transformative possibilities. Education shaped by planetarity is not merely a site of critique but one where normative structures can be reimagined through engagement with concrete aesthetic experience. Spivak insists that this is not about abandoning tradition but about actively taking responsibility for its inheritance and transformation — what she calls «ab-use»[23] — by working within tradition while exposing and claiming its epistemic limits as a new point of departure. Aesthetic education, in this sense, does not seek to define identity in positive terms but through a reflection on non-identity, cultivating openness to those whose existence is marginalized by economic and cultural structures of power.

Thus, planetarity challenges the universalizing tendencies of global knowledge, not by rejecting tradition wholesale, but by repositioning education as a site for negotiating new modes of thought. It invites us to rethink how epistemic structures condition freedom, how aesthetic experience can foster new political imaginations, and how responsibility might be redefined not as a burden but as an enabling condition for collective agency.

The notion of planetary thought provides us with a guiding educational metaphor for thinking normativity without claiming universal validity. Even further, Spivak effectively problematizes universality while resisting the plunge into relativism. Her approach compels us to reconsider how epistemological structures shape ethical and political engagement, making aesthetic experience the primary site for cultivating responsibility—one that emerges as a right toward one's own capacities for engaging with the world. This is specifically where the recognition of the limitations of subjectivity may also reveal an opening toward futural possibilities.

Yet, while Spivak's notion of aesthetic education offers an important reorientation for education, it does not provide a fully developed conceptual framework for engaging with normativity in its critical and aesthetic dimensions. Here, I argue, Adorno's negative dialectics provide a significant contribution—offering a concrete method for reimagining normativity as an ongoing negotiation between critique and possibility. His thought not only aligns with Spivak's reconceptualization of responsibility but further radicalizes it by foregrounding the tensions within aesthetic experience. More importantly, it provides us with a concrete interpretative model for rethinking normative frameworks guiding education, as well as a tangible pedagogical agenda.

[20] G. C. Spivak, p. 9.
[21] G. C. Spivak, p. 342.
[22] G. C. Spivak, p. 346.
[23] G. C. Spivak, p. 3.

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3. NEGATIVE NORMATIVITY AND THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVE AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Adorno's engagement with teaching cannot be categorically separated from his philosophical work, as in both cases, he sought to address a fundamental impasse: the necessity of an epistemic shift in society and the seeming impossibility of that very shift. As Volker Heins observes, Adorno's idea of education was not simply about restoring democratic institutions but about «the transformation of the ideas and habits of citizens»[24]. This makes Adorno's reflections on education particularly significant in this context: it is through education that his philosophy—often deemed excessively negative or pessimistic— opens a way to engage with a question he considered essential: «how a thinking obliged to relinquish tradition might preserve and transform tradition»[25].

Education, in this sense, had to reckon with the historical rupture left by Auschwitz—not by offering moral prescriptions or ideological reconciliations but by cultivating a habit of critical vigilance and resistance to regression. This, for Adorno, meant fostering an ethical stance that resists the normalization of past atrocities by making their memory an active force in the present. In *Education After Auschwitz* Adorno formulates a new categorical imperative for education with the following statement: «The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again. Its priority before any other requirement is so absolute that I believe I do not need to justify it.»[26]

The figure of Auschwitz here functions in a way that fundamentally complicates the relationship between particularity and universality. It operates in two distinct yet intertwined registers: first, as a concrete event that resists rationalization or integration into historical continuity, and second, as a synecdoche—an allegory for systemic violence embedded in modernity. While Auschwitz remains a singular historical event, in Adorno's imperative, it marks a radical break that negates the Enlightenment's progressive teleology, thereby gaining a universal *meaning*. However, Adorno does not seek to transform Auschwitz into a fixed moral maxim but rather insists on recognizing it as a materially embedded social fact—one that already conditions the possibilities of individual and collective self-determination. As Davies observes: «That is what 'after Auschwitz' means: the environment is contaminated.»[27]

Hence, Adorno retains an open futurity, as his demand is not for historical closure, but aimed at a reorientation toward its non-recurrence: «to arrange one's thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz does not repeat itself»[28]. This imperative is new not in its content, but in its form. Unlike the Kantian maxim, it is not grounded in a rational, universally applicable rule, but rather critical reflection on materially grounded – aesthetic – experience: «A discursive consideration [of this imperative] would be a mockery, for the new imperative gives us a corporeally felt moral addendum.»[29]

Adorno reconstructs normativity through a contradiction between particular experience and universal concept—a negative normativity grounded in historical rupture. Consequently, Adorno's approach does

[24] V. Heins, *Saying Things That Hurt: Adorno as Educator*, "Thesis Eleven" 110, no. 1, 2012, p. 72.
[25] T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, London: Taylor & Francis 2004, p. 55.
[26] T. W. Adorno, *Education After Auschwitz* in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York: Columbia University Press 2005, p. 191.
[27] M. L. Davies, *'Education after Auschwitz' Revisited* in Martin L. Davies ir Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (ed.), *How the Holocaust Looks Now*, Macmillan UK 2006, p. 249.
[28] T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 365.
[29] Ibid.

not impose an ethical norm onto experience but derives it from experience itself—demanding critical reflection rather than moral affirmation.

This shift challenges classical subject-centered epistemology by prioritizing the object, suspending its determination by existing knowledge systems. As Bernstein argues, Adorno's imperative does not merely call for critical reflection but necessitates a transformation of the structures regulating everyday life[30]. Education "after Auschwitz," then, cannot rely on memory politics or ethical precepts, nor can it remain bound to Enlightenment tradition that failed to prevent its occurrence.

If Auschwitz is understood not simply as an analogy for systemic violence, but as a synecdoche—a material fragment that immanently expresses social contradictions—then we can utilize Adorno's ideas a model for reinterpreting normativity in education. Instead of prescribing doctrines, such interpretation would seek out and articulate experiential ruptures and open space for a possible «epistemological change that will rearrange desires» to use Spivak's expression. An Adornian perspective is fertile here, as it resists both moral universalism and historical relativism, instead demanding a continuous critical engagement with the contradictory character of experience.

Such notion of aesthetic education precludes closure of subjectivity and is based on anthropology of indeterminacy[31]. As such, it provides a minimal negative criterion for self-determination based on grounds of continuous critical self-reflection of experiential conditions of violence—not as a universal moral lesson, but as an active force disrupting complacency. As he states: «Perhaps we do not know what man is and what the right order of human affairs should be, but we do know what man should not be and what order of human affairs is wrong. Only in this real and concrete knowledge does something else, something positive, remain open to us.»[32]

Finally, despite its radical critical engagement, this understanding of negative normativity avoids the infinite regress that sometimes plagues critical approaches to education, Carsten Bünger observes. Here, critique does not become the goal of education as such. It must stop where it encounters the materiality of the event, which exceeds the powers of rationalization. This suspension of rationalization is, in essence, a reflection on the limits of (human) capacity—it is this suspended negation of negation that gives critique its force and allows the aims of education to be defined negatively, as «the necessary negation of the negativity symbolized by Auschwitz.»[33]

4. IMAGINING OTHERWISE: EXAKTE PHANTASIE AND THE CRITIQUE OF HUMAN CAPACITY

As seen above, Adorno's educational thought can be understood as an attempt to transform the foundational concepts that orient education—salvaging their emphatic content by negating their fixed meanings and, in doing so, opening possibilities for their renewal without prescribing in advance what that renewed

[30] J. M. Bernstein, *Intact and Fragmented Bodies: Versions of Ethics "after Auschwitz"* in "New German Critique" 33, nr. 1, 2006, p. 32.
[31] C. Thompson, *Adorno And the Borders of Experience: The Significance of the Non-Identical For a 'Different' Theory of Bildung* in "Educational Theory" 56, no. 1, 2006, p. 82.
[32] T. W. Adorno, „Individuum und Organisation" in *Gesammelte Schriften, t. 8: Soziologische Schriften I*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2003, p. 457.
[33] C. Bünger, *Negative Normativität: Zur prekären Konstitution pädagogischer Kritik* in *Normativität in der Erziehungswissenschaft*, ed.. Wolfgang Meseth et al., Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden 2019, p. 97.

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meaning should be. For example, as Ian Macdonald observes, Adorno endorses Kant's critique of immaturity, emphasizing the need to take responsibility for one's own thought and experience. Yet he simultaneously rejects Kant's concept of autonomy—an ostensibly kindred notion—because it posits a purely formal sphere of rational interiority, in which the self-legislating subject is bound solely by the moral law. Such an *a priori* account of morality, Macdonald explains, is for Adorno «utterly contradictory: in acting only in accordance with the abstract moral law, the subject abandons the lived, material and a posteriori context that calls for action and in which action happens.»[34] In this light, the analysis of Adorno's framing of 'Auschwitz' as an educational imperative provides a model for thinking normativity negatively—grounded in reflection on aesthetic experience. It is this mediated, embodied experience that becomes, for Adorno, the necessary site from which responsibility and ethical reflection must emerge.

Similarly, Daniel Cho points out that Adorno's notion of critical self-reflection should not be mistaken for introspection or self-analysis. Rather, it is an outwardly-oriented practice in which the self becomes a site for mediating contradictions of society as a whole—an expansive form of thinking that situates individual experience within a broader historical and social constellation. [35] However, this openness is only possible through an acute awareness of the closure that defines subjective epistemic structures. For Adorno, reflection, indeed, any thought that is truly productive, involves a certain «passivity»[36] – an awareness of the material and epistemic conditioning of the self, that allows for an expansive experiential field in which subjectivity is no longer the sole privileged point.

Therefore, for Adorno, refection entails a paradoxical movement. It turns away from objects as they are immediately given in order to grasp the form of their givenness—understood as the expression of a subjective relation that constitutes their sedimented content. Such *intentio obliqua*, in Adorno's terms, is a secondary reflection that exposes the contingency of reflection itself by revealing its form as aesthetic semblance (*Schein*). From this aesthetic perspective, an object's apparent stability reflects not intrinsic qualities but the historical limits of our cognitive and pragmatic capacities.

As Thomas Huhn emphasizes, reflection itself bears an internal dialectic: it not only discloses the boundaries set by our capacities but simultaneously gestures toward the possibility of their transformation. Reflection reveals its own limit as a capacity—and in doing so, becomes a *meta-capacity*: the ability to establish a relation that remains undetermined in advance.[37] Every reflection is thus also a narrowing, as each determination imposes a boundary that defines not only the object but also our own epistemic horizon.

In this light, the ontological insecurity induced by the paradoxical character of the Anthropocene can be understood as the outcome of over-determination of our capacities. Without secondary reflection our modes of relating harden into tautological structures. Hence, subjectivity risks becoming subordinated and trapped within the recursive logic of its own faculties. The conditions of experience begin to coincide with the outcomes of production, rendering the world into a projection that reinforces its fixed identity. And yet, it is precisely against this constraint that reflection can open toward what is not yet determined—toward a singular encounter with otherness that resists familiar conceptual frameworks.

[34] I. Macdonald, *Cold, Cold, Warm: Autonomy, Intimacy and Maturity in Adorno*, "Philosophy & Social Criticism" 37, no. 6, 2011, p. 670.
[35] D. Cho, *Adorno on Education or, Can Critical Self-Reflection Prevent the Next Auschwitz?* in "Historical Materialism" 17, no. 1, 2009, p. 76.
[36] T. W. Adorno, *Notes on Philosophical Thinking* in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York: Columbia University Press 2005, p. 129.
[37] T. Huhn, *Aesthetic Education, Human Capacity, Freedom* in Nathan Ross, ed., *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2015, p.178.

The "passivity" required by such reflection entails yielding to the "preponderance of the object," where semblance mediates the transgression of subjective closure by illuminating its contingency—shaped by cultural norms, habits of thought, social structures, needs, and desires. As Adorno writes, «In the places where subjective reason senses its own contingency, the primacy of the object shimmers through: that in the object which is not a subjective addition.» [38] The «warmth of things,» [39] as Adorno sometimes calls it, is not a positive intensification but the apprehension of an altogether different relation to the world—one discovered within the very materiality of experience and our capacities to respond to it.

Framed as a critique of capacity, aesthetic reflection offers both a challenge and an opportunity for rethinking education in the context of the Anthropocene. On the one hand, it compels us to reconsider the normative content of objectivity and truth, demanding a perspectival shift in how knowledge is conceptualized and enacted. Perhaps mirroring a turn from globality to planetarity in it's orientation, Adorno's educational thought invites a move away from a representational paradigm of knowledge toward a performative interpretation of knowing[40]. From this perspective, education is no longer oriented solely by the question of how to know the world, or what we can say about how it is. Rather, it calls us to ask: what kind of relationship with the world does our knowledge materially express—and ultimately, what kind of relationship could it bring into being?

Through its critical, aesthetic engagement, Adorno's educational thought grounds the guiding concepts of education—truth, autonomy, responsibility—in lived, materially mediated experience. It offers an interpretive framework that recharges these seemingly abstract ideas by recognizing traces of alterity within what appears most familiar: the concrete, if contradictory, materiality of anthropomorphic experience. Aesthetic reflection foregrounds the contingency of our mediated relation to the world, enabling an immanent transgression of human-centered perspectives without abandoning human determinacy. As J. M. Bernstein remarks, «Adorno's philosophical project is to resurrect a legitimate anthropomorphism, an anthropomorphic nature»[41]. Crucially, this legitimacy is not grounded in a return to some unspoiled, mythical state, but rather in «a recovery of objects where object means a thing that exemplifies the entirety of what is human in tension with what is not.»[42] Put otherwise, aesthetic education seeks to mobilize the tension that arises from reflecting on the contingent closure of our epistemic frameworks, transfiguring it into a generative opening toward radical, immanent possibility in relation to alterity. Adorno thematizes this dynamic in *Aesthetic Theory* as an aesthetic *tour de force*: «How can making bring into appearance what is not the result of making?»[43]

This utopian charge of aesthetic semblance introduces into education an inductive yet speculative mode of material imagination—what Adorno terms *exakte Phantasie* (exact fantasy). In contrast to Kant's productive imagination, which synthesizes intuitions through *a priori* concepts, Adorno conceives exact fantasy as a mode of invention – *ars inveniendi* – grounded in rigorous receptivity and material responsiveness. Rath-

[38] T. W. Adorno, *On Subject and Object* in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York: Columbia University Press 2005, *Critical Models*, p. 254.
[39] T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, Radical Thinkers, London, New York: Verso 2005, p. 22.
[40] For a more expansive discussion on Adorno's performative understanding of truth see: O. Hulatt, *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth*, Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts, New York: Columbia University Press 2016.
[41] J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Modern European Philosophy, Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 196.
[42] T. Huhn, „Aesthetic Education, Human Capacity, Freedom", p. 183.
[43] T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London; New York: Continuum 2002, p. 107.

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er than creating ex nihilo, it «abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, reaching beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement.»[44]. Such a mode of imagination relies on minimal, yet decisive, rearrangement of the elements of experience to disclose its dormant immanent possibilities. Exact fantasy operates in the tension between fidelity to the object and the imaginative revelation of what exceeds its immediate appearance: its non-identity.

As Philipp von Wussow emphasizes, this process embodies the productive charge of Adorno's "negative" experiential passivity. In order «to mirror the thing as it is, the subject must give back more than it receives,» [45] recreating the world from the traces left in perception, traces that are non-identical to any pre-given conceptual determination of the object. In this act, the subject not only reconstructs the object's fragmentary properties into a new aesthetic semblance but simultaneously reconfigures itself as a relational agent. For Wussow, the originality of *exakte Phantasie* lies in this interplay of receptivity and spontaneity, a conscious constellation in which world and subject reciprocally emerge. It is this dynamic that renders exact fantasy both precise and inventive.[46]

This dialectic grants exact fantasy its critical and utopian function. It fosters a mode of thinking that remains open to the "preponderance of the object," disrupting the tautological closure of over-determined capacities. Its exactness lies not in abstraction, but in its refusal to impose external meanings — allowing the object's latent possibilities to emerge from within the historical and material constellation in which it appears. As Wussow notes, exact fantasy thus exceeds its epistemological significance: it «also acquires a therapeutic function and becomes, indeed, a condition for the success of culture.»[47]

Exakte Phantasie suggests a receptive yet speculative pedagogy—an *ars inveniendi* rooted in concrete experience and attuned to possibilities yet to emerge. As Douglas Yacek observes, the significance Adorno attributes to images in education is often overlooked.[48]. Yet it is precisely this emphasis on images that enables us to reimagine environmentally and socially critical education not merely as deconstructive, but as imaginative and open-ended. Through aesthetic distancing, which defamiliarizes the relation to the object, *exakte Phantasie* fosters a form of experiential intimacy—one that both questions and transforms students' capacities to relate to the world.

Learning, in this sense, revolves around the interpretation of phenomena as expressive images: freed from logical necessity and revealed in their contingency. This contingency, in turn, opens a space for aesthetic reconstruction, where such images can reappear as counter-images to the given. As Adorno puts it in *The Actuality of Philosophy*, philosophy—or here, pedagogy—must bring the singular and dispersed elements of experience into changing constellations until they coalesce into a figure that can be «read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears.»[49]

More pointedly, the challenge of reviving futural imagination under conditions of ontological insecurity in the Anthropocene may not require a new pedagogical framework, but rather an opportunity for students to act and reflect within education itself. A pedagogy informed by *exakte Phantasie* empowers teachers to

[44] T. W. Adorno, *The Actuality of Philosophy* in "Telos" no. 31, 1977, p. 131.
[45] P. von Wussow, *Logik Der Deutung: Adorno Und Die Philosophie*, Epistemata, Bd. 434, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2007, p. 202.
[46] P. von Wussow, p. 204.
[47] P. von Wussow, p. 205.
[48] D. Yacek, *Dialectics of Education: Adorno on the Possibility of Bildung in Consumer Society* in "Philosophy of Education", 72, 2016, p. 210.
[49] T. W. Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', p. 127.

take play with utmost seriousness—facilitating a space in which students reflect on their own experiences without imposed preconceptions. As Adorno writes in Minima Moralia, «The unreality of games gives notice that reality is not yet real. Unconsciously [children] rehearse the right life»[50].

In this sense, *exakte Phantasie* calls for a pedagogy that treats imagination as a way of reconfiguring it from within. It fosters what we might call *pragmatic fictions*: images and counter-images that question the prevailing norms of efficacy, usefulness, and instrumentality—not by rejecting them wholesale, but by exposing their contingent, historically situated character. Such fictions destabilize the anthropocentric assumption that human perspectives and interests are the sole measure of value and action. They open up a space for considering alternative modes of participation in a shared world, attuned to the contradictions and entanglements of our material reality.

As Susan Buck-Morss suggests, children's games, with their confusion between what is 'natural' and what is 'fabricated', offer a critical model for such imaginative practices. «Perhaps the child's game of *Topsy-Turvies*, where humor, knowledge of reality, and make-belief all find expression,» she writes, «is the ontogenetic origin of negative dialectical operations.»[51] The inversion of objects and subjects in play mirrors a utopian reversal of the real distortions of social life—the transformation of subjects into objects. What the child gets "wrong" in play, Buck-Morss argues, reflects «a humane inversion of the original distortion.»[52] Pedagogically, then, *exakte Phantasie* affirms the potential of imaginative play as an aesthetic rehearsal for a different way of inhabiting the world. In an educational context marked by ontological insecurity and an impoverished sense of futurity, such practices are not mere fantasy. They are exercises in critical hope, grounded in the capacity to hold open the question of what life—human or non-human—could mean.

[50] T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 228.
[51] S. Buck-Morss, *Piaget, Adorno, and Dialectical Operations* in John M. Broughton, ed., *Critical Theories of Psychological Development*, PATH in Psychology, New York: Plenum Press 1987, p. 258.
[52] S. Buck-Morss, *Piaget, Adorno, and Dialectical Operations*, p. 261.

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