

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE: EDUCATIONAL HISTORY AS A RADICAL PRACTICE

El arte de lo posible: La Historia de la Educación como práctica radical


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Abstract. This essay attempts to show how ecological thinking, through a partial reading of Walter Benjamin's works, could provide a solid basis for integrating public history, art-based research and activism into the history of education. As an undisciplined, feral history, the essay links Alexander von Humboldt with Walter Benjamin, and compares the craft of the historian of education with digging, hunting, pearl diving, ragpicking, and wayfaring. The last two sections of this essay draw on the former by linking the concepts of "actuality" and "crisis" to a discussion of the results of a pre-conference on ecological thinking organised at the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE) in Milan, 2022. The workshop began with a viewing of the documentary film "Stagnant Hope: Gary, Indiana" (2014) by the American filmmaker Alex J. Semchuck, and aimed to open a discussion on the possibilities of studying educational ecologies in the history of education. The themes presented in this section are grouped along a series of so-called collectibles, offering a discussion on the themes of "Stagnant Hope", "Urban Debris", "The Time of Hell", "Urban Exploration", and the "Urban Fabric". The essay concludes with a reflection on how to challenge "Stagnant Hope" along the lines of the proposed radical approach to educational history.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; (educational) ecology; undisciplined/feral history; actuality; crisis.

Resumen. Este ensayo pretende demostrar cómo el pensamiento ecológico, a través de una lectura parcial de la obra de Walter Benjamin, podría ofrecer una base sólida para integrar la historia pública, la investigación artística y el activismo

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en la historia de la educación. Como una historia indisciplinada y salvaje, el ensayo vincula a Alexander von Humboldt con Walter Benjamin y compara la labor del historiador de la educación con actividades como cavar, cazar, buscar perlas, recolectar chatarra y viajar. Las dos últimas secciones de este ensayo se basan en la primera, relacionando los conceptos de «actualidad» y «crisis» con un análisis de los resultados de un taller previo a la conferencia sobre pensamiento ecológico, organizado en el marco de la Conferencia Internacional Permanente de Historia de la Educación (ISCHE) en Milán, 2022. El taller comenzó con la proyección del documental «Stagnant Hope: Gary, Indiana» (2014), del cineasta estadounidense Alex J. Semchuck, y tuvo como objetivo abrir un debate sobre las posibilidades de estudiar las ecologías educativas en la historia de la educación. Los temas presentados en esta sección se agrupan en torno a una serie de denominados «coleccionables», ofreciendo un análisis sobre los temas de «Esperanza estancada», «Escombros urbanos», «El tiempo del infierno», «Exploración urbana» y el «Tejido urbano». El ensayo concluye con una reflexión sobre cómo desafiar la «Esperanza estancada» desde la perspectiva del enfoque radical propuesto para la historia de la educación.

Palabras clave: Walter Benjamin; Educación para la sostenibilidad; Interdisciplinariedad/historia salvaje; Actualidad; Crisis.

*A rare trail
Where are the demands that frightened you?
Your heart gathers around the undiscovered
and in the future lies the song.¹*

THIS IS NOT AN INTRODUCTION²

This “essay”³ will end where other contributions to this special issue have started or, perhaps better, could have started, whether that is consciously or

¹ Own translation: “Wo sind die Forderungen die dich schreckten? Dein Herz versammelt sich um Unentdeckten und in der Zukunft liegt das Lied.” From the poem “Ein rar begangener Pfad”, which was originally published between 1906 and 1910. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Gesammelte Werke: Die Gedichte* (Munich: Anaconda, 2020), 460–461.

² Surrealist sensibility. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. After Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 460.

³ Vincenzo Mele, “Conclusions: Metropolis as Tragedy, Metropolis as Trauerspiel”, in ed. Vincenzo Mele *City and Modernity in Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin. Fragments of Metropolis* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 347–382. Here Mele (348) writes: “The open structure of the essay, its being an experimental form, an ‘attempt’ – this is the literary meaning of the word ‘essay’ – make it a genre absolutely suitable [...]. (T)he essay does not have the task of theorizing or defining objectively, but rather of opening to a ‘flight line’.” This is exactly what I intend to do.

not.⁴ It attempts to demonstrate how ecological thinking through a partial reading of Walter Benjamin's works – call it an ecological reading of Benjamin – could provide a solid basis for integrating public history, art-based research, and activism in the history of education. However, it by no means attempts to add yet another layer to the bulk of “Benjaminian” literature.⁵ Like Leon Wieseltier in his preface to Benjamin's “reflections”, I confess that I often experience difficulties in understanding Benjamin.⁶ I also confess that in recent years I have not always felt at home or comfortable in the field of educational history. I often return from a conference with a feeling of dissatisfaction. This is not an argument against what I would like to call conventional history of education. I was lucky enough to have had both Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon as my PhD supervisors, and I learned from them that the strongest research is often based on extensive archival material.

On the other hand, I too often experience what Robert Rosenstone defined as the “tyranny of data” and the risk of being drown in detail. Hence, with Rosenstone I would like to emphasise that my critique is not intended as “a call against empiricism” in educational history. Rather, this essay seeks to argue that significant elements of the past have remained “outside the empirical circle” of conventional history and that there are other ways of *doing, making* and *knowing* history.⁷ Whilst conventional history of education is also creative “in the sense of the work of understanding and representing the past”, I feel more attracted to a kind of “creative history” Alison Twells, Will Pooley, Matt Houlbrook, and Helen Rogers refer to as “undisciplined history”.⁸

⁴ This essay is part of the special issue “Can the arts change ways of thinking about history of education?”, guest eds. Eulàlia Colleldemont and Ian Grosvenor, *Historia y Memoria de la Educación*, 23 (2026).

⁵ Bjørn Schiermer, “The (in)actuality of Walter Benjamin: On the relation between the temporal and the social in Benjamin's work”, *Time & Society*, 25 (2016): 4. See also, for instance, Carlo Salzani, *Walter Benjamin and the actuality of critique: Essays on violence and experience* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), xii, mentioning the field of “Benjamin studies” and even a “Benjamin industry”.

⁶ Leon Wieseltier, “Preface”, in ed. Peter Demetz *Reflections: Essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), x.

⁷ Robert Rosenstone, “Confessions of a postmodern (?) historian”, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 8 (2004): 165.

⁸ Alison Twells, Will Pooley, Matt Houlbrook and Helen Rogers, “Undisciplined history: Creative methods and academic practice”, *History Workshop Journal*, 96 (2023): 153-175. The term is borrowed from Ann Rigney.

Undisciplined histories do not present themselves as “failed versions of disciplined history”, but open up “the multifarious ways in which people who are not bound by academic discipline ‘relate to the past,’ via performance, re-enactment, identification, pleasure, and more.”⁹ In this essay, I will present such an undisciplined approach as a *radical* practice. It is radical in that it not only searches to not entrench within disciplinary boundaries,¹⁰ but also in that it puts an emphasis on a process-oriented rather than an output-oriented approach. It foregrounds an “interweaving of the then and the now”, and by doing so it could be considered an “attempt” or an “experiment” in historical imagination.¹¹ It is also radical because it “refuses to exclude the I”,¹² which is why I explicitly mention the “I” in subtitles of this essay.¹³ In this respect, I draw on the versatile genre of “evocative autoethnography”, which gained momentum in social-work research in the mid-1990s through the efforts of not only academics but also artists and performers. In that sense, it is not new. Autoethnography is characterised by experimentation with “genre-bending” and “messy-text forms of representation” – an example of which is the essayistic form of this article – in response to the “conventions of third-person, silent authorship”. This “genre of doubt” combines a “humanizing, moral, aesthetic, political, and personal form of representation” with a discourse of ambiguity, contradiction, and contingency.¹⁴

⁹ Ann Rigney quoted in Twells *et al.*, “Undisciplined history”, 155.

¹⁰ This is not just a call for crossing disciplinary boundaries and interdisciplinarity; rather, it attempts to push, stretch or, in a more radical way, to question the boundaries of disciplines. Out of a defensive reflex, historians of education tend to overemphasise research methodologies and theories “from within” history as a “strategy of boundary maintenance”. See Twells *et al.*, “Undisciplined history”, 158. In my view, this approach, which treats the field of educational history too much as a discipline in crisis, does more harm than good, as it hinders renewal from within and contributes to the current dullness of the field.

¹¹ Twells *et al.*, “Undisciplined history”, 166.

¹² Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, “Why autoethnography?”, *Social Work & Social Sciences Review*, 23 (2022): 9.

¹³ The “I” also resonates within the HEC International Research Group. HEC stands for “History of Educational Ecologies”. It is a collective of like-minded historians of education who are interested in exploring the potential of ecological thinking in the context of educational history. The research group is based at Campus Landau of the RPTU–University of Kaiserslautern-Landau in Germany. Further information is available here: <https://ezw.rptu.de/ags/ab-historische-bildungsforschung/hec> (Accessed: 25 September 2025).

¹⁴ Bochner and Ellis, “Why autoethnography?”, 13, 15. This approach’s inherent focus on self-understanding also forces me to interrogate my relationship with my mentors, Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon – hence my occasional explicit reference to them.

A turn to Benjamin, then, not only provides me the opportunity to embark on such a creative history; relying on Benjamin, and quoting him, is in itself also the result of such a creative turn. It was Ian Grosvenor who did me find my way to Walter Benjamin as well as to John Berger who became important to me in my reflections on visual educational history, particularly in my research on both documentary and classroom film.¹⁵ Through such readings, I also discovered, among others, Susan Sontag and Adrienne Rich.¹⁶ As a result, I sometimes deliberately include poetry or references to popular literature in my writing. The latter is not simply a characteristic of “artistic variants of historical practice”,¹⁷ since also Marc Depaepe taught me the joy of integrating such references in academic work.¹⁸ So it was probably no coincidence that one of the judges at my doctoral defence compared my writing style to that of the late Harry Mulisch. I felt flattered, as Mulisch is my favourite author, something the judge was unaware of.¹⁹ In order to avoid giving the

¹⁵ Angelo Van Gorp, “The Decroly School in documentaries (1930s-1950s): Contextualizing propaganda from within”, *Paedagogica Historica*, 47 (2011): 507-523; Paul Warmington and Angelo Van Gorp, “Education in motion: Uses of documentary film in educational research”, *Paedagogica Historica*, 47 (2011): 457-472; Angelo Van Gorp, “‘Springing from a sense of wonder’: Classroom film and cultural learning in the 1930s”, *Paedagogica Historica*, 53 (2017): 285-299.

¹⁶ Here one can think of “issues of voice”, as expressed in Heidi Degerickx, Griet Roets, Kris Rutten and Angelo Van Gorp, “‘What kind of silence is being broken?’ A Visual-Rhetorical History of the Out-of-Home Placement of Children in Poverty in 1990s Belgium”, *Paedagogica Historica*, 53 (2017): 707-729. Incidentally, it is significant in this context that not only the title but also elements of the introduction and discussion draw on the work of Adrienne Rich and Susan Sontag.

¹⁷ Twells *et al.*, “Undisciplined history”, 155.

¹⁸ A good example is the inclusion of the Dutch author Benno Barnard in our joint chapter on the centenary of the Decroly School. See Angelo Van Gorp, Frank Simon and Marc Depaepe, “Persistenz einer Nischenschule: Hundert Jahre Decroly-Schule in Brüssel, Belgien”, in eds. Michael Göhlich, Caroline Hopf and Daniel Tröhler *Persistenz und Verschwinden. Persistence and Disappearance* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008), 172. Indeed, for me, Depaepe is the prime example of a conventional historian of education, but I write this with great respect. Also Depaepe emphasises the importance of creative writing by stating that “one of the intrinsic joys of the trade lies in the creative use of language – the constant struggle to convey an idea correctly, or to put the right word in the right place.” See Marc Depaepe, “After the ten commandments... the sermon? Comments on David Labaree’s research recommendations”, in ed. Marc Depaepe *Between educationalization and appropriation: Selected writings on the history of modern educational systems* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2012), 473.

¹⁹ This is where any comparison ends, because in all my humility I have absolutely no desire to compare myself to the erudite Dutch writer. Anyone who has not yet read *The Discovery of Heaven* (1992) should do so urgently. Mulisch’ early autobiography *Self-portrait with turban* (1961), which was integrated in his book *Food for Psychologists*, offers an interesting reflection on history I don’t want to withhold from the reader; due to its connection to the themes discussed in this essay: “The past is a product of the *present*, much more so than vice versa. There is no such thing as ‘absolute’ history. What

reader the impression that this essay contains the confession of a historian going through a mid-life crisis, as well as to ensure that this essay includes more “histoire” than “ego”,²⁰ it is time to finally start my narrative, which because of its fragmentary style, its deliberate “essayism”²¹ actually does not require an introduction.

*That is the longing:
to dwell midst the waves
and have no homeland in time.*²²

HUMBOLDT, BENJAMIN, AND I

The first paper – I could also call it an “essay” – the HEC collective wrote on ecological thinking, was one on the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, better known as the Spanish flu.²³ Relying on an “ecological approach”, we explored the interrelationships between the incidence of the influenza pandemic of 1918-19, its trajectories and its impacts on education. We put an emphasis on children and their environment, which we considered being “ecological arrangements” that allowed for the mapping of associated social, institutional, cultural and material contexts and relations, alongside axes of experiences, behaviours and choices during what had been a life-threatening crisis. Although this pretty much sums up what we were trying to do and, more importantly, emphasises the link between an ecological arrangement or educational ecology on the one hand and a crisis on the other, it is interesting to note that at the time of writing we were unaware of the extent to which the question we included in our title – “What does this have to do with everything else?” – referred

exists is merely the *chaos* of all that has happened. History is a *web of lines* that the present imposes on the chaos of the past. The *mess* always remains the same; it just *grows* and has no meaning in itself. Like the *future*, history changes from moment to moment.” Harry Mulisch, *Selbstporträt mit Turban* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2002), 111-112 (own translation from German, emphasis by author).

²⁰ Freely adapted from Rosenstone, “Confessions”, 166.

²¹ Mele, “Conclusions: Metropolis as Tragedy”, 350. In the Benjaminian tradition, the technique of quotation is an inherent part of this essayistic approach to history.

²² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 551. Convolute S4a,2: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die frühen Gedichte* (Leipzig, 1922), p. 1 (epigraph). In the original German version it reads: “Das ist die Sehnsucht: Wohnen im Gewoge und keine Heimat haben in der Zeit.”

²³ Angelo Van Gorp *et al.*, “‘What does this have to do with everything else?’ An ecological reading of the impact of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic on education”, *Paedagogica Historica*, 58 (2022): 728-747.

to the very origins of ecological thinking. Although we did mention that the German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) first coined the term “ecology” in 1866, we had overlooked the connection Haeckel had with the German polymath and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), for whom “everything was connected via reciprocity and, above all else, interactions”.²⁴ Humboldt “found connections everywhere”, nature was a “living whole” where organisms were “bound together” in a “net-like intricate fabric”, a so-called “web of life”.²⁵ Humboldt had “always loomed large in Haeckel’s life”, and “ecology” was the term he more specifically used to address the Humboldtian science and to stress “the relationships of an organism with its environment”.²⁶

Although Susanne Witzgall refers to the many successive reinterpretations of Haeckel’s definition, she also emphasises that the term “has always been understood as a doctrine of relations and of dynamic interrelations, as well as a synonym for their totality”, and that it “has today become a ubiquitous model of thought across the arts and sciences”.²⁷ Before we get there, however, I would first like to return to Humboldt’s approach to ecology, for it may provide a ground for also labelling Benjamin’s methodological aspirations as “ecological”. More specifically, we need to return to Humboldt’s *Naturgemälde*,²⁸ literally a “painting of nature”,²⁹ which was a “unique combination of science and aesthetics”,³⁰ showing the “sense of

²⁴ Ottmar Ette, “The lists of Alexander von Humboldt: On the epistemology of scientific practice”, in eds. Roman Alexander Barton, Julia Böckling, Sarah Link and Anne Rüggeheimer *Forms of list-making: Epistemic, literary, and visual enumeration* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 108.

²⁵ Andrea Wulf, *The invention of nature: The adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the lost hero of science* (London: John Murray, 2016), 5, 245.

²⁶ Wulf, *The invention of nature*, 289-99, 307.

²⁷ Susanne Witzgall, “Hybrid ecologies – An introduction”, in eds. Susanne Witzgall, Marietta Kesting, Maria Muhle and Jenny Nachtigall *Hybrid ecologies* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2020/2021), 13.

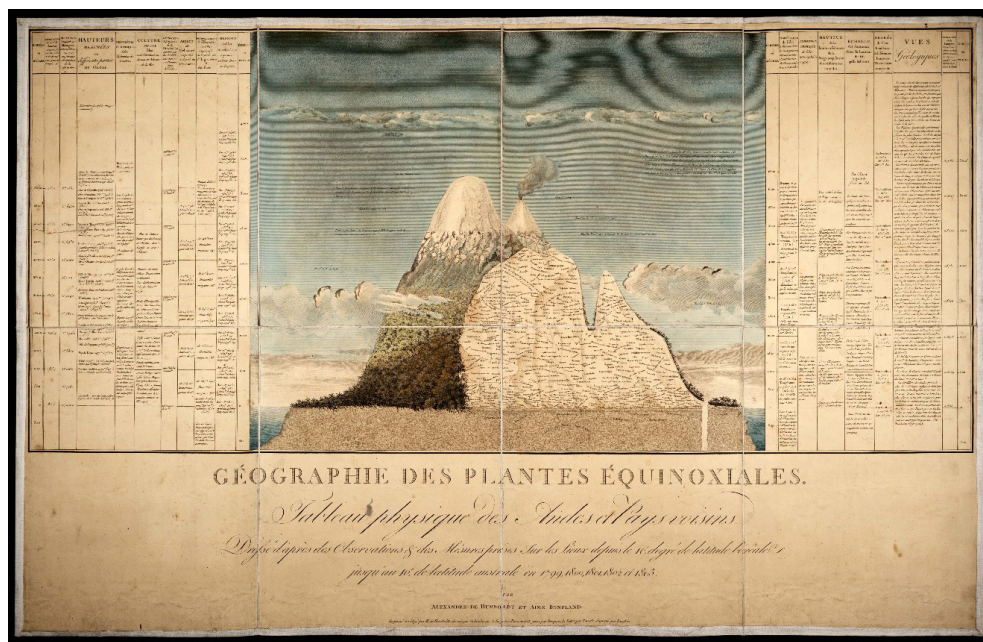
²⁸ Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland, *Essai sur la géographie des plantes accompagné d’un tableau physique des régions équinoxiales. Fondé sur des mesures exécutées, depuis le dixième degré de latitude boréale jusqu’au dixième degré de latitude australe, pendant les années 1799, 1800 1801, 1802 et 1803. Avec un planche* (Paris and Tübingen: Schoell, Cotta, 1805). See also Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland, *Essay on the geography of plants*. Edited with an introduction by Stephen T. Jackson. Translated by Sylvie Romanowski (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009). A high-quality digital copy is available on the website of the Biodiversity Heritage Library: <http://botanicus.org/page/1061689> (Accessed: 25 September 2025).

²⁹ Wulf, *The invention of nature*, 88.

³⁰ Ette, “The lists of Alexander von Humboldt”, 118.

unity or wholeness” of a “microcosm on one page”. The drawing illustrated nature as “a web in which everything was connected” (Figure 1).³¹

Figure 1: “Tableau physique des Andes et pays voisins”. Courtesy of Peter H. Raven Library/ Missouri Botanical Garden (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



A striking parallel exists in the way various authors have been discussing both Humboldt’s and Benjamin’s methodology. Let me start with the emblematic example of Ottmar Ette’s description of Humboldt’s “island approach to writing”, an approach featuring

small text-islands which were not recorded in a continuous sequence, but rather linked relationally with one another. Each text-island, only occasionally titled, served as a small work in itself with its own logic and voice – yet at the same time an island world insofar as each island was situated in a multi-relational network with other islands. This enabled a much more precise implementation of the foundational principles of his scientific concept.³²

³¹ Wulf, *The invention of nature*, 88.

³² Ette, “The lists of Alexander von Humboldt”, 111.

Interestingly, Ette notes that into his work, Humboldt deliberately built in “weaving flaws” (*Webfehler*) that contained the illusion of coherence, as they created gaps in consistency through which different patterns of arrangement and logic become apparent. Humboldt’s only systematic practice, Ette argues, was to traverse and undermine disciplinary boundaries and divisions. New relationships and connections constantly emerged, terminology and perspectives seemed to be in a constant state of flux, and the inclusion of other phenomena always produced new contexts that were previously “buried”.³³ Humboldt’s approach, in other words, was genuinely “transdisciplinary”. Perhaps we could even call it “undisciplined” science. Whatever the case, from here it is only a small step to the Benjaminian “philosophic play of distances, transitions, and intersections”, as Humboldt’s “text-islands” and “weaving flaws” may be compared to Benjamin’s “taste for quotations” and the “perpetually shifting contexts and ironic juxtapositions” in his writings.³⁴ Benjamin may have been “the hero of fragmentation”, but he was certainly not the “unsystematic man” that Wieseltier had in mind.³⁵

THE DIGGER, THE HUNTER, THE PEARL DIVER, AND I

The aforementioned word “buried” is important in this regard. As Benjamin wrote:

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. [...] Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers.³⁶

³³ Ette, “The lists of Alexander von Humboldt”, 112, 116.

³⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 75. See also Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, “Translator’s foreword”, in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, xi.

³⁵ Wieseltier, “Preface”, vii.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle”, in ed. Peter Demetz *Reflections: Essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 26.

And as Bridget Crone, Sam Nightingale and Polly Stanton so aptly put it in relation to fieldwork as a radical practice:

Imagine you are making a burrow: the direction, the depth and width of the burrow depend upon the conditions of the ground (its texture, relative moisture, elevation, mineral consistency and so on); as you move, you do not know where you might end up and gradually your orientation and sense of space relative to the above-ground world changes.³⁷

Burrowing, then, is a work with “the materialities of the site”, Crone and her colleagues add. As one goes deeper and deeper down, one let go of what one thinks one knows and opens oneself up to the unknown. This digging, however, is much less unsystematic than one might think. After all, you don’t just go out and start digging.³⁸ Vincenzo Mele may be right in his claim, therefore, that Benjamin preferred “the figure of the hunter over that of the adventurer”. Whereas the adventurer “sees” by depending on “intuition and chance”, the hunter “seeks” and picks up “traces”. The historian-as-hunter has been frequently compared to the figure of the “detective”, but also Sebald’s “ruminant curiosity” and more specifically his metaphorical figure of the “canine sniffing” – which can be equally adventurous – seems here appropriate.³⁹ But perhaps it is more adequate to follow Hannah Arendt, who admired Benjamin’s “gift of thinking poetically” and compared Benjamin to a “pearl diver”:

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of

³⁷ Bridget Crone, Sam Nightingale and Polly Stanton, “Editor’s Introduction”, in eds. Bridget Crone, Sam Nightingale and Polly Stanton *Fieldwork for future Ecologies: Radical practice for art and art-based research* (Onomatopoe 225, 2022), 10.

³⁸ However, it is important at this point to repeat Benjamin’s carefully chosen words: “True, for successful excavations a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam [...]” See Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle”, 26.

³⁹ Mele, “Conclusions: Metropolis as Tragedy”, 351-353. Jed Rasula, *Genre and extravagance in the novel: Lower frequencies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 180. See also Angelo Van Gorp and Frederik Herman, “On the trail of the toucan: A travelogue about a peregrination in educational history”, in eds. Frederik Herman, Sjaak Braster and Maria del Mar del Pozo Andrés *Exhibiting the past: Public histories of education* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 363.

the past [...]. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive [...] and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as “thought fragments.”⁴⁰

However, I have already noted the significance of the connection between educational ecologies and the concept of crisis in ecological thinking. Hence, in view of an ecological reading, the ultimate Benjaminian figure with which to compare the historian seems to be the “ragpicker”.

THE RAGPICKER, THE WAYFARER, AND I

Referring to the method of literary montage applied in his *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*), Benjamin wrote, that he would not inventory “the rags” or “the refuse”, but allow, “in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them”.⁴¹ Willem Schinkel emphasises that Benjamin was indeed interested in the “rags”, the “debris” or “the detritus of history”.⁴² Susan Sontag saw in the ragpicker a surrealist figure, one whose “acuity was directed to finding beautiful what other people found ugly or without interest and relevance – bric-a-brac, naïve or pop objects, urban debris”.⁴³ Indeed, inspired by Surrealism, Schinkel argues, Benjamin gathered “the debris of the past in order to make it appear, if only in a lightning flash, in dialectical images such as that of the arcades”.⁴⁴ The

⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Introduction”, in ed. Hannah Arendt *Illuminations: Essays and reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 50-51.

⁴¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.

⁴² Willem Schinkel, “The image of crisis: Walter Benjamin and the interpretation of ‘crisis’ in modernity”, *Thesis Eleven*, 127 (2015): 41.

⁴³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 79. This is in conjunction with the following quotation from André Breton’s first Manifesto on Surrealism (author’s own translation): “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain hitherto neglected forms of association, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to destroy forever all other psychic mechanisms and to replace them in the solution of the main problems of life.” See André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2024), 36.

⁴⁴ Schinkel, “The image of crisis”, 41.

connection to Surrealism raises awareness of the “inescapable presence” of the historian in his craft.⁴⁵ In quotation, in translation, in the act of criticism, Carlo Salzani adds, Benjamin picked up fragments, as the ragpicker does, and rearranged them in a “dialectical construction, one that actualizes and politicizes the interpretive act”.⁴⁶ Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin found in *The Arcades Project* a montage of citation and commentary “intersecting at a thousand different angles, setting up vibrations across the epochs of recent history, so as to effect ‘the cracking open of natural teleology,’ unfolding through the medium of hints or ‘blinks’”.⁴⁷

According to Paula Alaszkievicz, *The Arcades Project* is in both its form and its content like a labyrinth: “it may involve frustrating encounters with obstacles, forbidden passages, and dead ends”.⁴⁸ She stresses that the book as a “metaphoric labyrinth” is “an ongoing prerequisite for its function as a method”; it is the book’s “labyrinthine architecture” that introduces the method of montage, Benjamin’s “compositional principle”.⁴⁹ In “A Berlin Chronicle”, Benjamin himself employed the metaphor of a labyrinth to describe the large city he remembered from his childhood at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ However, in his essay, he uses “labyrinth” and “maze” interchangeably, whereas Tim Ingold explicitly distinguishes between the two.⁵¹ My radical premise is that Ingold’s distinction can be applied to the field of educational history. A “disciplined”, conventional history of education is represented by a maze, whereas an “undisciplined” history of education acts in a labyrinthine environment. Most of us “going about our business” in the field of educational history walk the paths that make up our discipline “not for what they reveal along the way but because they afford transit from one point of call to another”. Ingold emphasises that the maze differs from

⁴⁵ Compare: Jan Laurens Siesling, *Art is more* (Wetteren: Cultura, 2015), 132-133.

⁴⁶ Salzani, *Walter Benjamin*, 165.

⁴⁷ Eiland and McLaughlin, “Translator’s foreword”, xi.

⁴⁸ Paula Alaszkievicz, “The Labyrinth: Metaphor and Method”. *Stedelijk Studies Journal*, 7 (2018): 4-5.

⁴⁹ Alaszkievicz, “The Labyrinth”, 5-6. See also John McCole, “Benjamin’s Passagen-werk: A Guide to the Labyrinth”, *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985): 497-509.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle”.

⁵¹ Tim Ingold, “The maze and the labyrinth: Walking, imagining and the education of attention”, in eds. Ernst Schraube and Charlotte Højholt *Psychology and the conduct of everyday life* (Hove, East Sussex/New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 99-110.

the labyrinth “in that it offers not one path but multiple choices, of which each may be freely made but most lead to dead ends”.⁵²

Unlike the labyrinth, the maze “does not open up to the world”; it encloses, “trapping its inmates within the false antinomy of freedom and necessity”.⁵³ Hence, a disciplined history of education is tied to the “in-duction” of the historian of education “into the rules and representations” of the discipline, whereas an undisciplined history of education is tied up to the “ex-duction” of the historian of education “into the world itself, as it is given to experience”. This “world” is what I would like to describe as the world across and beyond the discipline’s set boundaries. An “undisciplined” historian, thus, is concerned with escaping the maze “by walking the labyrinth”.⁵⁴ In the labyrinth, the historian’s attention “comes not from having arrived at a position but from being pulled away from it”. Choice is not an issue: “The path leads, and the walker is under an imperative to go where it takes him. But the path is not always easy to follow. [...] The danger lies not in coming to a dead end, but in wandering off the track. Death is a deviation, not the end of the line”.⁵⁵ Relying on Jan Masschelein, Ingold distinguishes in this regard between the “attentional wayfaring” of the labyrinth and the “intentional navigation” of the maze. In this way, the “undisciplined” historian of education presents him-/herself not only as a digger, hunter, pearl diver, and ragpicker, but ultimately also as a wayfarer.⁵⁶

*Our straight lines, close-crop hedges, all that mowing,
The wish for outside to be neat like inside, seem wrong.*⁵⁷

⁵² Ingold, “The maze and the labyrinth”, 101.

⁵³ This paragraph: Ingold, “The maze and the labyrinth”, 101-104.

⁵⁴ In its “folies labyrinthiques”, undisciplined history shows a clear parallel with Surrealism, which is characterised by a “geography without borders” and identifies with the metaphor of the labyrinth. It is no coincidence that the Surrealist’s official organ in the 1930s was called “Minotaure”. See Effie Rentzou, “Transgresser les frontières 1933-1937”, in ed. Katia Sowels *Surréalisme: Transformer le monde* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2025), 44-45; Didier Ottinger, “Labyrinthe”, in eds. Didier Ottinger and Marie Sarré *Surréalisme: Changer la vie* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2025), 4-6.

⁵⁵ By going *off* beaten tracks one can still be *on* track, see Van Gorp and Herman, “On the trail of the toucan”.

⁵⁶ Here a parallel can be drawn with “the flâneur”, one of the key figures in Benjamin’s works. See, for instance, Wieseltier, “Preface”, xlvii; Arendt, “Introduction”, 21.

⁵⁷ Alan Jamieson, “I consider going feral”, *Irish Pages*, 11 (2021): 174-175. This volume is dedicated to the Anthropocene.

GOING FERAL: I, AFTER ALL

Building on the previous distinction between a labyrinth and a maze, and drawing on Ingold's discussion of Jan Masschelein's distinction between a "rich methodology" and a "poor pedagogy",⁵⁸ I will further develop my analogy with educational history. In this context, a rich methodology belongs to the maze of a disciplined history of education, because it enforces "a kind of closure" and blocks movement. In contrast, the wayfarer in the labyrinth of an undisciplined history of education persists, "without beginning or end, pushing out into the flux of things".⁵⁹ However, this parallel forces me to make two assumptions. Firstly, the adjective "poor" can be misleading and should not be interpreted as unreliable or inferior compared to a rich methodology. Secondly, craftsmanship can be found in both a rich methodology and its poor counterpart.

Whereas disciplined history can be considered "domesticated", some may consider undisciplined history "an unwelcome presence" and "feral" or "out of place" and "out of control".⁶⁰ Rather than calling this position "poor", I suggest referring to it as "feral history", emphasising its liminal position between the extremes of "pure domesticity" and "raw wilderness".⁶¹ Departing from convention, its intended looseness and unruliness challenge the rigid, institutionalised nature of a rich methodology. It does not conform to established methodological rules; it is fragmentary, wildly associative and emerges in unexpected forms. It is also politically disruptive and incorporates the more-than-human into historical storytelling. Its methodological foundation is ecological thinking.

⁵⁸ Jan Masschelein, "Educating the gaze: the idea of a poor pedagogy", *Ethics and Education*, 5 (2010): 4353.

⁵⁹ Ingold, "The maze and the labyrinth", 108. The comparison between Benjamin's labyrinth and a rhizome is apparent at this point: "I am not concerned here with what is installed in the chamber at its enigmatic center, ego or fate, but all the more with the many entrances leading into the interior. These entrances I call primal acquaintances [...]." See Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle", 31; see also Arie Graafland, "Of Rhizomes, Trees, and the IJ-Oevers, Amsterdam", *Assemblage*, 38 (1999): 30.

⁶⁰ Kristine Hill, Michelle Szydłowski, Sarah Oxley Heaney and Debbie Busby, "Uncivilized behaviors: How humans wield 'feral' to assert power (and control) over other species", *Society & Animals*, 31 (2023): 907-908.

⁶¹ Ralph R. Acampora, "Nietzsche's feral philosophy: Thinking through an animal imaginary", in eds. Christa Davis Acampora and Ralph R. Acampora *A Nietzschean bestiary: Becoming animal beyond docile and brutal* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 7.

This position comes at a cost: it is marginal and inconvenient to hegemonic orders.⁶² Vulnerability is the ransom one pays for it. In my opinion, however, feral history finds fertile ground in an ecological reading of Benjamin, particularly in Benjamin's view of history in relation to his reading of Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus", which has been the subject of many interpretations. The painting shows an angel

looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁶³

As Schinkel upon his reading of Benjamin notes, crisis occupies a central place in many accounts of modernity.⁶⁴ Modernity is often seen as a great "crisis of tradition", a "rupture" that has involved, for example, processes of secularisation, rationalisation and differentiation, as well as capitalism. Even if modernity no longer develops along the path of "progress", it is presented as having no alternatives, and this is what according to Schinkel constituted the real "catastrophe" of modernity for Benjamin. As Adrienne Rich formulates it: "Capitalism presents itself as a law of history, or rather, a law beyond history, beneath which history now lies corroding like the Titanic."⁶⁵ The arcades were a

⁶² From a critic's perspective, following Ingold and Benjamin, respectively, this position could poetically be described as "convicts on the loose", living "at the back of beyond". See Tim Ingold, "From trust to domination: An alternative history of human-animal relations", in eds. Aubrey Manning and James Serpell *Animals and human society: Changing perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 3; Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle", 11.

⁶³ Ninth thesis on the philosophy of history, see Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the philosophy of education", in Arendt, *Illuminations*, 257-58.

⁶⁴ Schinkel, "The image of crisis", 37.

⁶⁵ Adrienne Rich, "Arts of the possible", *The Massachusetts Review*, 38 (1997), 320.

capitalist “phantasmagoria”, a “dream image”. For Benjamin, however, they appeared as a “dialectical image” of history, emerging in conjunction with the present, in a “flash” of understanding, a “shock”, at a “standstill”.⁶⁶ The spaces that interested Benjamin most were precisely those in which the former presence of an exuberant and fascinated collective still resonated, “decaying structures or objects robbed of their cult”, such as the arcades.⁶⁷

The arcades were “charged with history” and seen as a dream image from which one had “awakened”.⁶⁸ At the same time, however, they were also a “wish image”, because “the invocation of crisis contained an awareness of the problematic nature of the status quo and an impetus for change”.⁶⁹ The dialectical images on which the historian’s research is based, Benjamin wrote, thus only becomes “legible” at a given historical moment. Their “recognisability” is part of “a temporal constellation” in which the past undergoes a kind of “telescoping” through the present and thus becomes “actual”.⁷⁰ It is “the ‘here’ in which the adequate becomes an actuality”, Benjamin wrote.⁷¹ Paradoxically, as Bjørn Schiermer argues, what is actual in Benjamin is his way of describing the “in-actual”, the dream image or object once placed at the centre of the “collective imaginary” that had gone “out of fashion” or been “left behind by the collective”.⁷²

In the current high-technological world, fundamental changes have taken place both in social relations and in the relations between human beings and their environment, changes that can only be described by the word “crisis”, from “climate crisis” to “financial crisis” to “crisis of

⁶⁶ Schinkel, “The image of crisis”, 40. Compare theses V, VI, and XVII in Benjamin, “Theses on the philosophy of education”, 255, 262-263.

⁶⁷ Schiermer, “The (in)actuality of Walter Benjamin”, 9-10.

⁶⁸ Schinkel, “The image of crisis”, 40.

⁶⁹ Schinkel, “The image of crisis”, 43.

⁷⁰ Benjamin quoted in Salzani, *Walter Benjamin*, 70. The term “actuality” means something like “to make present”, but is actually difficult to translate. It cannot be reduced to topicality, usefulness or relevance. See Salzani, *Walter Benjamin*, xi-xiii.

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, “On some motifs in Baudelaire”, in Arendt, *Illuminations*, 199.

⁷² Schiermer, “The (in)actuality of Walter Benjamin”, 4-5.

democracy”.⁷³ The cult of capital and economic market mechanisms are undermining the “promises of democracy”, including prosperity for all, justice, equality and popular sovereignty.⁷⁴ The moment we are living in is one of growing insecurity, fear and upheaval.⁷⁵ Capitalism could therefore be understood in terms of a “crisis of subjectivity”, that is, a “crisis of modes of existence”.⁷⁶ The invention of the individual is the real “political detonation”, the “explosive arming of modern democracy”, as Peter Weibel calls it. With the “discovery of the individual” as a citizen, human and civil rights were also discovered. According to Weibel, the discovery of the individual means nothing less than the paradoxical process of the individualisation of social life. As a result, individuality became the central theme of modernity. The modern individual expects social systems to offer living conditions that not only enable individuality, subjectivity, and uniqueness, but also promote them.⁷⁷

When this is not the case, an experience of crisis seem to be the moment per excellence in which dream objects could become wish objects, a time in which history could reveal dialectical images that enable ecological thinking, not so much “thinking about ecology” but rather “*doing* ecological thinking”.⁷⁸ This ecological thinking is, in the words of Lorraine Code, an intense effort to unsettle “the self-certainties of western capitalism and the epistemologies of mastery it underwrites”.⁷⁹ This thinking emphasises “the vibrating interdependencies of diverse human and non-human actors, their cohabitation, their common becoming, and their constitutive entanglements in biological-artificial

⁷³ Peter Weibel, “Preface”, in ed. Peter Weibel *Global activism: Art and conflict in the 21st century* (Karlsruhe and Cambridge, MA: ZKM and MIT press, 2023), 24.

⁷⁴ Peter Weibel, “People, politics, and power”, in ed. Peter Weibel *Global activism: Art and conflict in the 21st century* (Karlsruhe and Cambridge, MA: ZKM and MIT press, 2023), 51.

⁷⁵ Maria Kaika, “Radical ecological imaginaries: Turning the ruins of our present into the legacies of the future”, in Witzgall *et al.*, *Hybrid ecologies*, 260.

⁷⁶ Kaika, “Radical ecological imaginaries”, 265. See also Félix Guattari, *The three ecologies* (London: Continuum, 2011).

⁷⁷ Weibel, “People, politics, and power”, 50.

⁷⁸ Witzgall, “Hybrid ecologies – An introduction”, 18. Author’s emphasis.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Susanne Witzgall, “‘A way of being in the world’: Relational onto-epistemologies in contemporary art and theory”, in Witzgall *et al.*, *Hybrid ecologies*, 73.

and material-semiotic assemblages”.⁸⁰ In this perspective, education is always part of an ecological arrangement. However, according to Kaika, “the transformation of ecological imaginaries and the construction of new socio-environmental narratives is no longer an intellectual exercise or a design drill”; it is an act of need and necessity, a political act. Public (educational) history offers, then, an excellent way out of “apolitical” and “agnostic” history, as it allows for co-creative engagement in designing “possibilities for the future” and imagining “new ways of being in common”.⁸¹ By relying on “the sheer power of a collective imagining of equality and a sense of collective hope”, by creating creative spaces in which “desires and needs” are defined, and “the forces that frustrate” are identified, public history can become “a strong tonic for the imagination”.⁸² As a socially engaged practice, public history could even be an excellent platform for collaborative and participatory art-based research, what may be labelled “activism”.⁸³

We are not simply entrapped in the present. We are not caged within a narrowing corridor at “the end of history.” Nor do any of us have to windsurf on the currents of a system that depends on the betrayal of so many others. We do have choices. We’re living through a certain part of history that needs us to *live* it and *make* it and *write* it. We can make that history with many others, people we will never know. Or, we can live in default, under protest perhaps, but neutered in our senses and in our sympathies.⁸⁴

Indeed, this is a call to arms. This is a call for an activist history of education. This is a call to “brush history against the grain”.⁸⁵ Yet we must avoid turning dream images into “hallucinations”, as Gregory

⁸⁰ Witzgall, “A way of being in the world”, 73. Lorraine Code’s emphasis on the aspect of positioning in ecological thinking draws on Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge, Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action, and Isabell Stengers’ ecology of practices. See Witzgall, “Hybrid ecologies – An introduction”, 18-19.

⁸¹ Kaika, “Radical ecological imaginaries”, 260.

⁸² Rich, “Arts of the possible”, 325.

⁸³ See Weibel, “Preface”, 23; see also Darren Pih and Laura Bruni, *Radical landscapes: Art, identity and activism* (London: Tate Publishing, 2022).

⁸⁴ Rich, “Arts of the possible”, 336. Author’s emphases.

⁸⁵ Benjamin, “Theses on the philosophy of education”, 257.

Bateson termed them, and try not to create a “maze of hallucinations” around us.⁸⁶

*The poet alone has united the world,
which in each falls far apart.
He has testified to the unheard-of beauty,
but since he himself still celebrates what torments him
he has infinitely purified ruin:
And still the ruinous becomes the world.*⁸⁷

COLLECTIBLES: BENJAMIN, GARY, AND I

As Schiermer argues, there is perhaps no more important metaphor in Benjamin’s writing than the ruin.⁸⁸ Martin Lawn once said that “images of decaying and collapsed school buildings” are particularly “unexpected and disconcerting”.⁸⁹ He argues that an abandoned school symbolises “a failing society, a weakening education service” and “the end of a vision”, and adds that there is “nothing more desolate than a factory or shopping mall in ruin, unless it is a school”.⁹⁰ It reminded me of the many iconic school buildings in Gary, Indiana that have been abandoned or demolished. Gary, Indiana once was a symbol of educational progressivism and urban-industrial America. Today Gary is a town in crisis. It is the most segregated metropolitan area in the United States and plagued by population decline, physical decay, joblessness, poverty, and crime. Gary’s debris made the city into a Mecca for urban explorers whose photos dominate the city’s imagery on the internet.

Since the Gary case has been on my mind for almost a decade, and since I have been digging through the literature like a ragpicker, looking

⁸⁶ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, evolution, and epistemology* (Northvale, NJ and London: Jason Aronson, 1987), 464, 481.

⁸⁷ Own translation: “Der Dichter einzig hat die Welt geeinigt, die weit in jedem auseinanderfällt. Das Schöne hat er unerhört bescheinigt, doch da er selbst noch feiert, was ihn peinigt, hat er unendlich den Ruin gereinigt: Und auch noch das Vernichtende wird Welt.” From the poem “Baudelaire”, which was originally published between 1910 and 1922. Rilke, *Gesammelte Werke*, 766.

⁸⁸ Schiermer, “The (in)actuality of Walter Benjamin”, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Martin Lawn, “Building ruins: Abandoned ideas of the school”, in eds. Kate Darian-Smith and Julie Willis *Designing schools: Space, place and pedagogy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 20.

⁹⁰ Lawn, “Building ruins”, 21, 23.

at Gary's past, present and future from different angles,⁹¹ it triggered me to organise a pre-conference workshop at the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE) in Milan, 2022.

My interest in documentary film quickly led me to the decision to organise the workshop around the viewing of a specific documentary that not only focused on the city's rich pedagogical past, but also, in order to allow for an ecological reading, embedded public education in a broader, more multifaceted theme of rise and fall. That I can now, a posteriori, connect this choice to Benjamin is something I am happy to accept, even if the connection may feel somewhat forced. After all, the iconic filmmaker John Grierson used the word "actuality" in his famous definition of documentary, which he defined as "the creative treatment of actuality". Although the word "actuality" here simply refers to "current events",⁹² Benjamin's much-quoted essay on "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" may provide evidence that allows the Benjaminian meaning to be read onto the word as well.

Benjamin compared the cameraman to the surgeon, penetrating deeply into reality's web. The picture the cameraman obtains, Benjamin wrote, "consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law".⁹³ By focusing on "hidden details of familiar objects", by exploring "commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera", the film, Benjamin argued, "extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives". At the same time, it manages to assure us of "an immense and unexpected field of action". The camera intervenes in reality, "with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions". Benjamin concluded: "Evidently a different nature opens

⁹¹ Angelo Van Gorp, "Requiem for Gary: Cultivating wasteland in and beyond the 'Age of Steel'", in eds. Karin Priem and Frederik Herman *Fabricating modern societies: Education, body and mind in the 'Age of Steel'* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 219-240; Angelo Van Gorp, "Imagineering eine demokratische Gesellschaft: Ein Plädoyer für eine engagierte historische Bildungsforschung", in eds. Anke Wischmann, Susanne Spieker, David Salomon and Jürgen-Matthias Springer *Jahrbuch für Pädagogik 2020: Neue Arbeitsverhältnissen – Neue Bildung* (Weinheim: Beltz, 2021), 91-101.

⁹² Selmin Kara, "Redefining documentary materialism: From actuality to virtuality in Victor Erice's *Dream of Light*", in ed. David LaRocca *The philosophy of documentary film: Image, sound, fiction, truth* (Lanham etc.: Lexington Books, 2017), 352-353.

⁹³ Walter Benjamin, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", in Arendt, *Illuminations*, Benjamin, "The work of art", 233-234.

itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man”.⁹⁴

Benjamin’s words take on a special meaning when one knows that the documentary I had chosen for the workshop was indeed one inspired by the many images of Gary’s debris. In his documentary *Stagnant Hope: Gary, Indiana* (2014) filmmaker Alex J. Semchuck explores the ruins of the city of Gary in the guise of an urban explorer.⁹⁵ The workshop began with a viewing of the documentary and aimed to open up a discussion on the possibilities of studying educational ecologies in the history of education. This section takes up some of the main elements that emerged from the discussion and explores them in the form of “collectibles”.⁹⁶

Stagnant Hope

Let me start with the title of Semchuck’s documentary, which emphasises the element of hope. In his fascinating book, providing a historical overview of the narratives that reveal how Gary has been spoken and written about throughout time, the American historian S. Paul O’Hara writes:

If I were to have a hope for this (i.e., his) study’s impact upon Gary, it would be the uncovering of the constructed narratives about Gary. If we realize how we have chosen to speak about Gary, we can sever that connection and, perhaps, free the city from these burdens. [...] Understanding social constructions frees us to reinvent, reinterpret, and reshape. We need not be that which we once were.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Benjamin, “The work of art”, 236-237.

⁹⁵ The full documentary is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnJsv46c8rw> (Accessed: 25 September 2025).

⁹⁶ I use the term “collectible” as a translation of the Dutch word “sprokkel”, a term that I, as a native Dutch-speaking scholar, systematically began to use as a Ph.D. student in the preparatory phase of my writing. It is probably no coincidence that the characteristic collecting of quotations that is part of this process shows a striking parallel to Benjamin’s convolutes. See Eiland and McLaughlin, “Translator’s foreword”, x.

⁹⁷ S. Paul O’Hara, *Gary: The most American of all American cities* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 13.

I have also included this perspective of hope in my own narrative about Gary. However true O'Hara's words may be, we are both white male outsiders – in my case European – looking in. This raises an ethical question for me, for who are we to express hope for Gary? What puts us in a position that allows us, if at all, to create or rather reproduce such a narrative of hope about Gary? After all, segregation can be seen as the legacy of a society literally built on slavery.⁹⁸ As Theresa Richardson wrote, “racism replaced slavery as a tool of social control in the concentration and segregation of African Americans at the bottom of society”.⁹⁹ Of the many dimensions of racial segregation in the United States, residential location and segregation is the most central “fulcrum of denied opportunity” because of its strong links to schooling, access to employment, neighborhood services and amenities, a healthy physical environment, and other factors.¹⁰⁰ Again, who are we to express hope for Gary?

Urban Debris

As in my previous articles on Gary, Indiana, the documentary focuses on both the rise and fall of the city. This is a common trope and can be found in many articles, books, commentaries and documentaries about Gary. But, while I made them the structuring elements of my narrative, the documentary's themes of rise and fall are more intertwined. However, in both my own narrative and the documentary, the emphasis is on Gary today as a “ghost town”, combined with an emphasis on the process of deindustrialisation. The decline of the steel industry in the Midwest has devastated Gary, a city built in 1906 specifically for steel production.¹⁰¹ Think of a “rust belt” environment of crumbling streets,

⁹⁸ David Andress, *Cultural dementia: How the West has lost its history and risks losing everything else* (London: Head of Zeus, 2019), 103.

⁹⁹ Theresa Richardson, “Moral imperatives for the Millennium: The historical construction of race and its implications for childhood and schooling in the twentieth century”, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 19 (2000), 317.

¹⁰⁰ Nancy McArdle, “Color lines in a multiracial nation: An institutional demographic overview of the United States in the Twenty-First Century”, in eds. Andrew Grant-Thomas and Gary Orfield *Twenty-first century color lines: Multiracial change in contemporary America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 43.

¹⁰¹ James J. Connolly, “Can they do it? The capacity of small rust-belt cities to reinvent themselves in a global economy”, in ed. James J. Connolly *After the factory: Reinventing America's industrial small cities* (Lanham etc.: Lexington Books, 2012), 5.

abandoned houses, blighted neighborhoods and a desolate downtown. Think also of the policy challenges associated with deindustrialisation, including a shrinking tax base, decaying infrastructure, overburdened social services, increased crime, a poorly educated workforce, underfunded schools and a marked decline in civic life.¹⁰²

Such a narrative, however, is problematic because it suggests that this urban decline is an “inevitable” and “irreversible” phenomenon. Terms such as “decay”, “decline”, “blight”, “degradation”, “deterioration”, and “degeneration” add “stigma” to “the pathos”, which is also evident in the metaphor of the ghost town. In using such terms, the narrative refers to a city that is “passive” or “suffering”, with a seemingly “inevitable future”, linked exclusively to external dynamics that cannot be controlled.¹⁰³ We should avoid narrative closure and see narratives more as liminal.¹⁰⁴ A city without people is a “dead city” and Gary is not dead.¹⁰⁵ Gary is not hell; it is not even purgatory to hell.

The Time of Hell

In addition to the pre-conference workshop in Milan, I also organised with HEC colleagues several workshops at history of education conferences in which we tried to stimulate ecological thinking using a montage of images.¹⁰⁶ Building on a combination of this workshop format and the pre-conference in Milan, I twice organised a project seminar with students from the Master of Educational Sciences in Landau. After watching the documentary about Gary, the students were asked to use associative thinking to find six tesserae (mosaic stones), in this case

¹⁰² Connolly, “Can they do it?”, 1.

¹⁰³ Emmanuèle Cunningham Sabot and Maja Ročak, “The language of shrinking cities: Terminology and translation to describe a new urban regime”, in eds. Karina Pallagst, Marco Bontje, Emmanuèle Cunningham Sabot and René Fleschurz *Handbook on shrinking cities* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 13, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Caroline Levine, “Endings and sustainability”, in eds. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler and Stefan Schubert *Beyond narrative: Exploring narrative liminality and its cultural work* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022), 249-250.

¹⁰⁵ Deyan Sudjic, *The language of cities* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 207.

¹⁰⁶ The method was clearly inspired by Benjamin and tested in Ian Grosvenor *et al.*, “‘We seek revelation with our eyes’: Engaging with school cultures through montage”, *Encounters in Theory and History of Education*, 17 (2016), 2-26.

three quotations and three images. These quotations and images did not have to be directly related to Gary, but had to be somehow connected to the content of the documentary. The students had to briefly explain their choices.

Unsurprisingly, many tesserae related to the element of hope in the film, frequently in conjunction with an account of the emancipatory or empowering power of education. Other tesserae drew on examples from the student's own region that showed parallels to Gary's story. Ludwigshafen, voted Germany's ugliest city in 2018, came to mind, as did Pirmasens, a nearby town that, like Gary, relied on a single industry, namely shoe manufacturing, and went into a downward spiral after the decline of that industry. Pirmasens is now one of the poorest regions in Germany. These tesserae were then assembled into a large mosaic, from which the students had to choose tesserae (quotations and illustrations) to create their own short narrative inspired by the documentary about Gary.¹⁰⁷ Such short narratives were considered "hints" or "tiny seeds of potential narratives" that eventually could be developed into a full narrative.¹⁰⁸

One of the tesserae chosen was the triptych "The Garden of Earthly Delights", painted by Hieronymus Bosch between 1490 and 1500. While the left panel depicts "Eden" and the right panel depicts "Hell", the central panel depicts a "false paradise" given over to the sin of lust, to earthly delights. The student chose this image because it reminded him of the narrative arc of Gary's rise and fall. Paradise was Gary in his heyday, hell is Gary today. In Benjamin's *The Arcades*, one of the convolutes describes modernity as "the time of hell":

The punishments of hell are always the newest thing going in this domain. What is at issue is not that "the same thing happens over and over" (much less is it a question here of eternal return), but rather that the face of the world, the colossal head, precisely

¹⁰⁷ When I explained this process to an American colleague, he compared it to jazz music. It is like improvising on a chord without losing sight of the structure of the song. Jazz can also be found in creative writing, even when it like in conventional history is based on extensive archival research. A good example is my essay "Springing from a sense of wonder", in which, in my opinion, the constant accompaniment by the jazz trio GoGo Penguin during the writing process is reflected in the rhythm of the text.

¹⁰⁸ Ette, "The lists of Alexander von Humboldt", 119.

If we were to describe this notion of hell as “the crisis of modernity”, and experience in the triptych a “shock” that emerges at a standstill, it opens the way for creative thinking. This is exactly what moved another student to create a “creative response” to the triptych, emphasising that Gary is not hell, and that “place attachment”, affect, emotion, feeling and memory cannot be ignored, even in places like Gary (Figure 2).¹¹⁰

A collage of 12 photographs showing various scenes from Gary, Indiana. The images include: a night view of the city skyline with people walking on a bridge; a large industrial building with smokestacks; a person walking in a park; a large brick building; a row of houses; a person working with a bag; a water tower labeled 'Gary'; a large brick building; a lake with a boat; a person in a green shirt; and a person in a blue shirt with 'I Love Gary' on it.

¹¹⁰ Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate wasteland: The landscape and memory of deindustrialization* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 32.

Urban Exploration

Urban explorers go where one is not supposed to go. To enter an abandoned site is to cross an imaginary divide that separates the “de-industrial present” from the “industrial past”. In conjunction with the narrative arc of rise and fall, urban explorers “cherish the past, lament the changes that are taking place, and believe that there is no going back”. This is the source of their feelings of nostalgia and loss, of “nostalgia’s melancholy”. The allegorical representation of remembered loss is evident in the temporal flow of the “urbex stories”. These stories, constructed along photographic series, are fundamentally stories of “discovery” and “possession”. The history and rhetoric of exploration is imbued with the “language of race and class”. Furthermore, the term “explorer” is associated with “European expansion” and “colonialism”. Similarly, the “imaginative geography” of urban exploration, like the colonial encounters of earlier times, is premised on “being on the outside looking in”. Urban explorers tend to be white, middle-class young people between the ages of fifteen and thirty, like Semchuck. Despite their stated desire to record places before they disappear, urban explorers are more interested in aesthetics than history. For urban explorers, ruins are sites of danger, disorder, decay. Which brings us back to Gary’s dominant imaginaries.¹¹¹

Urban Fabric

Like many American cities, Gary has an orthogonal grid with a central orientation axis: the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Broadway. To this orthogonal grid, an additive grid called the Patch was created when the city was flooded by mass migration. It soon became a minority ghetto.¹¹² Understanding this urban fabric, or the ecology of this grid, means recognising the interdependence and coexistence of social, political and environmental processes and events in the urban sphere.¹¹³ Gary’s debris is a symptom of a segregated city with social and geographical barriers.

¹¹¹ This paragraph is based on High and Lewis, *Corporate wasteland*, 11, 42-44, 55-57.

¹¹² Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2019), 38-39.

¹¹³ Derek Gregory et al. eds., *The dictionary of human geography. 5th edition* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 783.

Depending on one's perspective, Gary can be described as a "carved city", a "disposable city", a "downsized city", a "rightsized city" or a "shrinking city", which connects again to the imaginary of Gary presenting an urban area that has experienced population loss, economic downturn, employment decline and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis.¹¹⁴ It also focuses on Gary as a perforated city, a city where demolitions have created a semantic shift from wasteland to open space.¹¹⁵

This prompts us to return to urban exploration and the meaning of nature, for a popular theme that runs through many urban exploration stories relates to "the wild". Urban explorers regularly compare ruins to the natural world.¹¹⁶ Abandoned areas are part of "a wild zone" that exists on the fringes of the modern deindustrialised or post-industrial city.¹¹⁷ Wilderness can only exist in places in the imagination or isolated from human contact, on the "peripheries of civilization". Standard representations of nature depict it as existing separately, outside the boundaries of normal everyday life.¹¹⁸ Semchuck's documentary always presents nature in a negative way. Indeed, nature is often seen as something *outside* human beings, *outside* cities, *outside* human societies. The city is posited as the "antithesis" of nature: the "artificial" against the "organic", the "cancerous, overgrown organ" that needs to be "checked and controlled".¹¹⁹

Although urbex photographs are like "pictorial trophies", and urban exploration could therefore be compared to hunting, the explorer-as-hunter is in no way equivalent to the historian-as-hunter. The people in Gary "are left" with ruins, which, in conjunction with segregation, could rightly be called "imperial formations". However, experiencing an "aftershock of empire", in the Benjaminian sense of "shock", could perhaps turn ruins into "epicenters of renewed claims, as history in a

¹¹⁴ Sabot and Ročak, "The language of shrinking cities", 9.

¹¹⁵ Sabot and Ročak, "The language of shrinking cities", 15.

¹¹⁶ High and Lewis, *Corporate wasteland*, 56-57.

¹¹⁷ High and Lewis, *Corporate wasteland*, 57.

¹¹⁸ Robert Schimelpfenig, "The drama of the Anthropocene: Can deep ecology, romanticism, and renaissance science rebalance nature and culture?", *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 76 (2017), 824.

¹¹⁹ Kaika, "Radical ecological imaginaries", 253.

spirited voice, as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlements, and unexpected political projects”. To think (ecologically) with ruins of empire is to “attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present”.¹²⁰

OUTLOOK: CHALLENGING STAGNANT HOPE

“Overcoming the concept of ‘progress’ and overcoming the concept of ‘period of decline’ are two sides of one and the same thing”, Benjamin wrote.¹²¹ Indeed, Benjamin’s concept of modernity shows how closely progress and decline are intertwined. But Benjamin’s conception of history also includes both the possibility of redemption and the possibility of change. In terms of ecological thinking, the collectibles on Gary raise awareness of the need to combine historical imagination with geographical imagination,¹²² to recognise the whiteness of dominant geographical imaginaries (and the need to decolonise them),¹²³ and to relate to a renewed engagement with nature away from the culture/nature dichotomy. An ecological approach refers not only to an attention to more-than-human worlds and timescales, but also to the interrogation of colonial domains and material cultures.¹²⁴

However, the collectibles about Gary have also touched on a problematic concept, that of “hope”. Ethical objections are legitimate and important to consider – this is the reason why I have not yet taken any concrete steps to initiate a public-history project in Gary, not to mention the current political climate –, but perhaps we can overcome our reluctance in this regard. If we are honest in our feelings and emotions. If we show that what is at stake affects us all. If we show, for instance, that the “public” in public history refers to “the fact of living, producing and

¹²⁰ Ann Laura Stoler, “Imperial debris: Reflections on ruins and ruination”, *Cultural Anthropology*, 23 (2008), 195-197.

¹²¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 460.

¹²² Derek Gregory, “Geographical Imaginary”, in eds. Derek Gregory *et al.* *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. 5th edition (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 282.

¹²³ Compare Witzgall, “A way of being in the world”, 73.

¹²⁴ Crone, Nightingale and Stanton, *Fieldwork for future Ecologies*, 14.

building together”, an “us”, a “common”.¹²⁵ Ecological thinking can therefore be regarded as an “adventure of hope”. As Isabelle Stengers put it: “(T)o ‘think’ is to create possibility against probability [...]. Hope is not about miracles, it is about trying to feel what lurks in the interstices.”¹²⁶ In other words, hope is not simply a desire for things to come or for life to improve, it is “the drive or energy that embeds us in the world – in the ecology of life, ethics and politics”.¹²⁷

As the explorative case study of Gary, Indiana, demonstrates, ecological thinking enables a radical critique of historiographical norms by revealing a feral history of education. This undisciplined form of educational history expands the scope of historical knowledge, encouraging us to reimagine and even question the boundaries, ethics, and audiences of the discipline. It invites non-historians, artists, and communities to “enter, dwell in, encounter”¹²⁸ and to participate as co-historians, embracing alternative and creative methods as well as inter- and cross-disciplinary approaches. It also makes space for histories that have been suppressed, forgotten or silenced, and encourages affective modes of engaging with the past.

I am aware that some might see my approach as being at odds with Marc Depaepe’s repeated mantra of “letting the past be fully the past, otherwise history ceases to be history”, yet I believe that dogmatic adherence to such a view is more likely to spell the end of educational history than the approach I propose here. I know that Depaepe is not a dogmatist and that he brings much more nuance to his thinking and writing than some might think. Moreover, it is important to remember that I am not proposing it as a substitute for conventional historiography. Rather, I see it as a necessary complement. If I were to sin against some of Depaepe’s “commandments”,¹²⁹ I would like to emphasise that I

¹²⁵ With reference to Hannah Arendt, see Antonio Negri, “Living in a time of crisis”, in Weibel, *Global activism*, 100-101.

¹²⁶ Isabelle Stengers, “A ‘Cosmo-politics’ – Risk, hope, change: A conversation with Isabelle Stengers”, in ed. Mary Zournazi, *Hope: New philosophies for change* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 245.

¹²⁷ Zournazi, *Hope*, 14-15.

¹²⁸ Bochner and Ellis, “Why autoethnography?”, 12.

¹²⁹ Marc Depaepe, “The ten commandments of good practices in history of education research”, in Depaepe *Between educationalization and appropriation*, 463-470.

am an agnostic when it comes to such pointless dogmatic incitement, but endorse the opposite when it comes to arguing against an agnostic history.

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