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Derek Ford's *Inhuman Educations*

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Derek Ford's *Inhuman Educations: on Jean-François Lyotard, Pedagogy and Thought* is a book that, despite the economy of its composition, will no doubt spark many diverse reactions from within the field of philosophy of education. This assessment, which by itself already bespeaks the book's scientific merit, is in no small degree due to the unusual way in which the author has conceived of his project: principally a thematic author study—with the French poststructuralist Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) as its central figure—it blatantly exceeds the limits of 'correct and complete representation'. Remindful of the author studies of the early Deleuze,[1] Ford rather sets out (as explained in his introduction) to trace a conceptual line of his own, that reconnects the major themes of Lyotard's philosophy into a compact new landscape of *pedagogical* thinking, one whose contours Lyotard might have never so much as surmised himself (cf. Ford 2021, 4; 11–13). Assisted by on the one hand his evident passion and expertise regarding Lyotard's oeuvre,[2] and on the other hand a writing style excelling in expressivity, nuance, *and* accessibility, Ford certainly makes his reader want to tag along in this speculative adventure up till the end. However, the extent to which that adventure actually breaks new ground, brings sufficiently new perspective to topical issues of contemporary education, may not always be entirely convincing, and thereby give rise to further discussion.

With this review, I hope to give a first push to such a discussion. After first highlighting some of the book's key points of interest—and the main conceptual lines connecting these—I will formulate two general criticisms. One regards the danger of the many dichotomies shaping the book's discourse, and the 'gaps' these tend to leave education with, especially when thinking about reading, writing, voicing, and listening as *concretely situated* practices. Another criticism regards Ford's apparent lack of attention to education as a *public* issue, and his overall stress on its "initiatory", "private", and "sectarian" aspects. In conclusion, I will make a more affirmative follow-up suggestion, based on my own research on music education, by expanding on some elements of Gilles Deleuze's discussion of "apprenticeship" within the literary oeuvre of Marcel Proust.

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[1] E.g., his studies on Hume, Nietzsche, Kant, Bergson, and Spinoza.

[2] Cf. also Ford's earlier publications on Lyotard, such as Ford (2015).

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Pedagogy as the Elusive Thought and Practice of "Infancy"

Again, perhaps the greatest strength of Ford's argument lies in the creative freedom with which it reworks Lyotard's (not seldom cryptic) philosophy into a highly consistent and original, *pedagogical* conceptual apparatus, which the author proposes to use for addressing anew a number of fundamental educational issues. At the heart of this apparatus, as the differentiating 'refrain' of the book's spiraling discourse, we find the irreducible ambiguity of the concept of "infancy". This Lyotardian term appears to have little to do with a particular age category, developmental phase or legal status (in opposition to adulthood) (Ibid., 2; 4). It primarily functions as an ontological category, denoting an essential rift in all human knowledge and activity—a rift that not merely unsettles and problematizes these in their systemic, self-reproductive and eventually *dehumanizing* ambitions, but that moreover dynamizes them by appealing to their paradoxically *inhuman* doubles of *thought* and *practice*. Hence also infancy's educational relevance: rather than representing either a lack of maturity or an ideal of childish innocence and imagination,[3] it presents education with a radical 'borderline' nature, that always again situates its agencies at the margin of dominant (political, social, economic, educational) systems and discourses of (in)humanity (Ibid., 9–11).

As Ford repeatedly emphasizes, and Joris Vlieghe, in his epilogue, also insists upon, the inhumanity of infancy and that of "the system"—even though seeming indissolubly linked—are qualitatively different. On the one hand the system, which according to Lyotard had seen an exponential proliferation since the rise of neoliberalism, always *postulates* a stable, a priori human identity and/or development, in order to justify the dehumanizing workings that keep it afloat—exploitation, colonization, segregation (Ibid., 7–8; 71–73). By subscribing to a definite idea of what it is to be(come) human, and to an educational curriculum in support of it, the system seeks to grants itself a license to make everything accommodating to this idea, if necessary by doing violence to what does not altogether fit. Infancy on the other hand does not presuppose any a priori humanity or subjectivity, and instead affirms the groundless, material, and in that sense 'inhuman' forces that, a posteriori, generate all human sense and experience. In contrast to the controlling, centralizing, and anthropocentric[4] dynamic of accommodation, it renders humans more affectable, or "passible" (in Lyotard's language), vis-à-vis what is precisely beyond their actual understanding and use of themselves and the world (Ibid., 60–61). To be sure, if for Ford this means that genuine education builds upon the affirmation of infancy's decentered emergence, it cannot be said that infancy provides education and pedagogy with a new 'foundation'. At best, infancy figures—even in the way Lyotard conceives of figure as opposed to form (Ibid., 17)—as what Heidegger would have called their *Ungrund* (Heidegger, 1991): an ever-retreating abyss *within* everything (systemic) education already does, and from which an inexhaustible flux of impulses is emitted that may or may not galvanize our well-established humanisms into new shapes.

As such, Ford's infancy defies all strictly empirical descriptions of educational experiences and practices, since these inevitably refer to already actualized systems and discourses (Ford 2021, 25). It can indeed, as Joris Vlieghe puts it, only be described in

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[3] Although, as Joris Vlieghe, writer of the book's epilogue, also observes, these aspects of infancy are not unrelated to its ontological radicality (Ibid., 75).

[4] The greater part of Vlieghe's epilogue can be seen as a reading of Ford's book through the lens of the issues of anthropocentrism and (post)humanism (see especially: Ibid., 78–81).

phenomenological terms (Ibid., 70), as a 'transcendental-empirical' or virtual condition of possibility immanent but *not* reducible to particular experiences and practices.[5] This is at least what Ford seems bent on showing by elaborating the concept of infancy through the discussion of a set of generic educational practices—reading, writing, 'voicing', and listening—which makes up the body of his *Inhuman Educations* (in the respective chapters 1 through 4). In these chapters, which are still punctuated by an intermezzo on the practices' *aesthetic* nature, the conceptual pairs of infancy/system and (in)humanity disseminate into a long parade of other contrasts. Form/figure, initiation/innovation, secret/public, childish/developmental, articulate/elliptical, beautiful/sublime, *lexis*/*phonè*, hearing/listening, etc.: in every one of these contrasts the fundamental ambiguity of infancy—and of "inhuman educations"—unfold themselves anew, with new nuances and accents adding to infancy's potential significance for our understanding of pedagogical thought and practice.

Although admittedly the Lyotardian idiom can be quite demanding at times, Ford does his utmost to provide us with a gentle yet thorough 'initiation'. Through his elegant interweaving of Lyotard's diverse assessments of the aforementioned practices, he situates each of these in a dynamic forcefield of multiple infantile and systemic variations. Multiplicity indeed seems to be key here (cf. inhuman education*s*): just as not all writing activities constitute *educational* writing practices, not all listening necessarily results in the kind of educational thought that reaches beyond acquired knowledge. And where empirical studies tend to reach for those phenomenal *results* that are most self-evident and practical—because they represent the system's legitimate forms and discourses[6]—a speculative approach like Lyotard's is needed to remain thoroughly affectable for the abysmal infancy off which these 'representative results' feed in the first place. The many aesthetic examples from Lyotard's writings on which Ford dwells equally attest to this. Obviously the experimental writings of Michel Butor or the extended technique compositions of Luciano Berio do not constitute educational situations in and of themselves (cf. Ibid., 33–36; 45–47ff.). Yet in every one of these cases Ford astutely points away *from* their systemic/discursive status as aesthetic objects, signifying relatively static and all too human meanings, *into* the more educationally promising direction of the inhuman and "anaesthetic" processes of affective becoming which the objects *enact* (Ibid., 54; 61). Moreover, in other instances, such as the section on racist and quiet reading (Ibid., 21–24), or Joris Vlieghe's compelling account of the essay (Ibid., 77–78), the Lyotardian framework at least also seems amenable to the conceptualization of more concretely situated, empirically observable educational practices and pedagogical discourses.

What Ford eventually hints at, and wherein he is (partly) seconded by Vlieghe, is that the inhuman educations which infancy calls to mind throughout all its manifestations, necessitate an ethos of initiation, privacy and secrecy (Ibid., 21; 28; 66–68). Counter perhaps to common perception, education cannot model its practices on any notions of public relevance (or concomitant buzz words like "innovation" and "development"), which just serve as ploys of the system to recapture infancy's elusive forces.[7] Instead it precisely needs separate, 'intervallic' spheres to deepen and multiply the infantile potentialities of its

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[5] Transcendental empiricism and virtuality are of course Deleuzian terms (cf. Deleuze, 2004). The same status might be said to apply to 'the' system as infancy's counterpart.

[6] See also the passages where Ford retakes Lyotard's reading of Kant's aesthetics, and contrasts the normative notion of *sensus communis* (and the concord of faculties typical of the beautiful) with the 'dissensual' abnormality of the sublime (Ford 2021, 38–39ff.).

[7] Interestingly, Ford shows that Lyotard even held *critique* to be one of these public ploys (Ibid., 8).

practices, rather than—as the classical critique of pedagogical initiation would have it—to consolidate its own (systemic) prerogatives, whether they be conservative or progressive. In one way, such spheres (schools, universities) are themselves always already constituted by the age-old educational practices which Ford discusses; however, it still takes a radical, and not so naturally human,"passibility" vis-à-vis the interruption of infancy's events (in the midst of these practices), to allow them to develop into truly new beginnings.

The Excluded Third and the Possibility of Another *Public* Education

Throughout Ford's compelling account of Lyotard's philosophy *as* pedagogy, the reader might nevertheless ask herself to what extent all of the elaborated conceptual contrasts actually help to come to grips with some of the (practical) challenges of contemporary education. Although in the previous section I have decidedly affirmed the importance of te book's more speculative and phenomenological approach to educational practices, it remains somewhat problematic that the author rarely combines his speculative observations *with* more outspoken attempts to extrapolate these into contemporary designs for (new) practical initiatives. It is a pity, for instance—to pick up upon this hint from Joris Vlieghe's epilogue—that Ford nowhere considers how pressingly the ongoing technological and digital developments within education interfere with his Lyotardian descriptions of reading, writing, voicing, and listening *as* educational practices.

What largely stands in the way of such an effort, is the fact that Lyotard, notwithstanding his avowed dislike for critique (see footnote 7), often still thinks in conceptual dyads that are more *dichotomous* than merely contrasting in nature. Surely he knew well enough that 'the' system cannot simply be overruled by infancy as if by another comprehensive regime of reality, just as the elusive emergence of the figural in the arts does not abolish the demands and conditions of their formal techniques. And yet it is impossible to avert the impression that for Lyotard/Ford, these systemic regimes by themselves have *nothing* (positive) to do with, or to contribute to, the experiences afforded by their abysmal counterparts. As such, one might say with Jacques Rancière, who criticizes Lyotard's absolute prioritization of the sublime, the irreducibility of infancy's abyss—its infinite eluding of the system's captures—easily slips into becoming a definite rupture, one that can ultimately only be overcome by an absolute Other,[8] rather than by alternative pragmatic-aesthetic political and educational collectivities (Rancière, 2009). Whether this is really how Lyotard and Ford intended their respective conceptual apparatuses to play out, may be doubtful, considering everything that has already been said. However, Rancière's observation does point out what they lack: the perspective of a *third* 'party' dynamically and constructively mediating between the various polarities which they install.

Of course it is Ford's merit that *Inhuman Educations* at least shows a basic sensitivity to this weakness in Lyotard's philosophy—especially from the point of view of education— by explicitly reworking it in terms of *practices*. Still, I am afraid that many practice-oriented educational researchers will not be entirely convinced by his approach, which always remains somewhat 'hovering' between the isolated, opposite poles of infancy and system, without really taking shape in a more situated, pluralist and contemporary educational

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[8] Cf. Lyotard's tendency, despite Ford's insistence to the contrary, to a kind of negative-theological 'mysticism' (in terms of "the ineffable", "the opaque", "silence"; cf. Ibid., 18, 39, 56).

sense. To use the example of voicing (chapter 3): nowhere within Ford's intricate analysis of the human voice and its relation to language, speech, music and thought, do we find any serious reflection on how the described ontological dynamics materialize themselves in, e.g., practices of language and music education.[9] At times it is almost awkward to see the book *not* engage particular educational settings, when these so obviously come to mind in the course of its arguments. It is one thing to reflect upon how in his experimental musical compositions Berio's bricolage techniques allow "the sublime" or "the mutic" to affect a recorded singing voice; but it is still another to connect these provocative aesthetic analyses to concrete educational processes of voicing, such as singing lessons (solmization, breathing exercises, self-recording). Not only would it be generous towards the less informed reader to make such practical connections more often; it would also help to 'take the edge' off the infancy/system dichotomy and prevent it from completely bifurcating the described realities—into a constraining, oppressive variety on the one hand (e.g., voicing as a 'mere' technical means of sonic-aesthetic expression), and a liberating, indeterminable one on the other (voicing as being affected by the formed sound's *inaudible*, "mutic" double).[10]

In addition to this remark about the dodgy status of practices as the 'excluded third', one could also say—as Joris Vlieghe already cautiously does—that Ford's endeavor to resituate the educational practices of writing, reading, etc. in the sole sphere of infancy, risks to come at the cost of completely downplaying education's public and collective dimensions (Ford 2021, 76; 79). In several places he explicitly—in following Lyotard—denounces the public and democracy, albeit in a qualified sense, for being but thinly veiled, 'repressively tolerant' appearances of the system, that are at odds with the initiating essence of true (infantile) education (Ibid., 21; 28–30).

In principle, the argumentation for this stance makes sense (and is fairly well-known). By making education subservient and accountable to the *actual*, given interests of society, all possibilities of genuinely new beginnings are forestalled, entailing education's reduction to what Ford calls "factory reproduction" (Ibid., 18). The problem, however, is that the author barely supplies us with another, more pedagogical notion of the public, and that he thus sometimes imperceptibly drifts towards an understanding of education that is dangerously 'privatized' (which is absolutely incompatible with his other views). Again, the poles of Ford's conceptual scheme are too strongly opposed—do the "secret" and "initiatory" dynamics of inhuman educations not always *act upon* the ongoing developments of public systems, albeit in a subversive vein? Is education's democratic concern not absolutely necessary to keep its "sectarianism" from turning self-sufficient, self-reproductive, and hence, systemically inhuman as well? If somehow infancy opposes the system, it can only successfully do so *in the midst of it*, by time and again carving out a sphere of its own that diffracts the system's 'public' forces, and lending them unsuspected new directions and intensities.[11]

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[9] Cf. Ibid., 64. Here Ford refers to the work of music theorist Nina Sun Eidsheim, yet without even mentioning the often very practical (and outright educational) suggestions she integrates in her theoretical analyses (Eidsheim, 2015).

[10] It seems symptomatic that Ford pays little deep-going attention to Berio's idiosyncratic use of 'extended technique' in his *Sequenza* compositions: is it after all not so that music's mutic, timbral mystery can only reveal itself *within* practical and discursive processes that are always—technically—mediated? (cf. Ford 2021, 46).

[11] It is in this way that Michel Serres conceives of education as *parasitically* living off a series of host systems, as both an excluded *and* included third (Serres 1997).

Thus, once more, the practical *how?* question asserts itself: how does such action take shape? How is infancy enabled to eventualize in our educational responses to public issues? Surely these questions do not reduce education to adaptive socialization, since education's responses to public society might always go beyond what society deems comfortable or evident (e.g., repetitive writing exercises and essay writing as a response to the 'shorthand' writing culture of social media). But they do reach beyond the esoteric, contemplative tone in which Ford betimes describes the workings of infancy, looking instead to the particular forces with which infantile practices can *make public* certain issues *anew*.[12] Obviously this need not replace Ford's interesting notion of educational "passibility" with an overstrung, politicizing activism; it should rather make us reflect on the concrete circumstances and conditions that make such a non-sytemic passibility publicly effective.

The Little Phrase of Vinteuil: Proustian *Ekphrasis* as Music-Educational Practice of Infancy

To conclude this review, I want to make an effort at extending some of Ford's pedagogical insights into the analysis of a more concrete and recognizably educational practice. To do so, however, I will first follow in Ford's footsteps by taking inspiration from an existing work of art—Marcel Proust's monumental *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu* [1913/27]).[13]

One of the reasons that account for the monumentality of this novel (or series of novels), is arguably that it presents us with one of vastest panoramas of possible experiences of art and aesthetic taste—covering pretty much all of the 'fine arts' (literature, painting and music especially), in addition still to more basic aesthetic practices such as discussed by Ford (reading, writing, voicing, listening, seeing, tasting, etc.) (cf. Acquisto 2017; Aubert 2013). In fact, in his study on Proust, Lyotard's contemporary Gilles Deleuze even goes as far as to make the strongly pedagogical point that Proust's novel is to be read less as a unified narrative—which, as far as it exists, seems indeed rather thin for the novels' size—than as a convoluted multitude of sensual and semiotic "apprenticeships" (Deleuze 2000, 3–4; 54–59).[14]

For all of their socio-psychological and ideological intricacies, Deleuze namely maintains, Proust's colorful characters staunchly resist all simple reduction to the individual a priori subjects of modernity (whether Cartesian, Kantian or phenomenological). Rather than sovereignly deciding or tragically undergoing a sequential narrative, the Proustian character (human *and* non-human) 'surfaces' throughout interlocking series of impersonal, a-subjective *effects*, arising from the repeated encounters between various perceptual-affective regimes and instigated by contingent yet forceful *signs* (e.g., romantic jealousy, the atmosphere of a landscape, a hall-way connecting two rooms, a painting, the famous madeleine). It is precisely when these signs, viz. motifs, interfere with the systemic regimes ruling the parade of *maisons* and salons that populate Proust's novel—social stratification,

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[12] Which is the claim of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, in their (outspokenly non-conformist) "defense of the school" (Masschelein and Simons 2013).

[13] To which on occasion Lyotard also refers, most curiously in his *The postmodern explained*, which in the original French is titled *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (the postmodern explained *to children*) (Lyotard 1988, 30–32).

[14] For a more elaborate discussion of this notion in Deleuze, see Bogue (2004).

family politics, etiquette, fashion, capital management—that processes of (infantile?) apprenticeship are launched in which characters and characteristic situations materialize. Yet as the indeterminate signs' determinate effects, these apprentice-characters reciprocally also become capable of putting the systems in which they operate *under these signs*,[15] effectuating some stir or change—a new situation—and causing the *maisons*' systems to shift ground (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 189; 197). In that sense, Deleuze reads more in Proust's celebrated madeleine than the narrator's archetypical memory of a strong experience of (pre-existing) subjectivity. Beyond such persistent hints of Platonizing anamnesis and idealism, he argues that the madeleine primarily functions as an impersonal, a-subjective sign triggering *eternally different* sensations and meanings, and cutting across all contexts and systems without ever aspiring to one ultimate or original essence (Deleuze 2000, 38–39).

One of the writing procedures intensely shaping such semiotic apprenticeships, is that of *ekphrasis*: the literary description of a (mostly visual) work of art (cf. Krieger 1992). As already indicated, *In Search of Lost Time* abounds in references to other artworks, but in some cases these references are elaborated into the kind of descriptions that really acquire a dramatic agency of their own—crystallizing new lines of apprenticeship, and thus, new apprentice-subjectivities/infancies. Interestingly, one of the most dramatic of these ekphrastic sign complexes is constituted by a series of *musical* pieces by the (semi-)fictive composer Vinteuil. Throughout repeated and fragmentary descriptions—most prominently of Vinteuil's violin sonata and septet—and at the hand of various characters playing or listening to the music in different settings—the novel famously projects "Vinteuil's little phrase" (five unspecified notes that come back in all pieces) as one of its most forceful motivic threads, signaling moreover a rather curious practice of *musical apprenticeship*.

From a Deleuzian point of view, it makes little sense to consider the ekphrastic passages describing Vinteuil's music, which sometimes comprise up to several pages, as faithfully 'representing' original experiences of listening to or performing music. This is not just because they figure in a work of literary fiction, or lack the necessary musical information to reconstruct an actual piece.[16] In the first place, I believe, coming close to what Ford coins as "rewriting" (and what Deleuze associates with the "re-search" in the novel's French title), Proust's repetitive descriptions instantiate an educational *practice* or *exercise* of always putting a piece of music *to work* in relation to new situations, so as to allow for the materialization, or performance, of ever so many local, situational 'variations' and subjectivities—musical, literary and socio-psychological (Deleuze 2000, 32; Ford 2021, 26–27). Being rewritten, replayed, rehearsed over and over again, the elusively 'same' five notes of Vinteuils "little phrase" start to do something more than just *identifying* the various systems in which they operate—the aesthetic and technical regimes of classical music, the stylistic, narrative and formal structure of the novel, the bourgeois dynamics of Paris's *fin-de-siècle* salons, the neurotic complexes of its denizens. As *ek*phrastic sign-practice tracing a transversal line *through* all these systems, the 'infantile' little phrase draws the music's transient sonic reality into written discourse and dramatic narration, while at the same time pushing these to the boundaries of meaningful linguistic expression and characterization.

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[15] Deleuze refers to the French *apprendre* ("learning") as a circular dynamic of 'capture' (*ap-prendre*): a character is captured by a sign *inasmuch* as it captures its situation through this sign (Deleuze 2000, 54–56).

[16] Which has in fact been tried, and led some to believe that Vinteuil stood for the composer Gabriel Pierné.

Thus, ekphrasis effectively presents us with an *experimental practice of shaping musical attention*. As repeated and transindividual practice it is never about 'getting it all', about reducing a given, individual experience to some absolute musical essence. Surely, that is exactly what Proust's characters occasionally try to do in their musical descriptions, eventually always to their biggest disappointment; e.g., when in a certain performance they fail to match the music with an affective idea it had *absolutely* come to represent for them. Nor however can educational ekphrasis for that same reason afford to be simply random or 'subjective'; this again is the typical Proustian stupidity[17] of salon characters that believe they can pass off *any* observation as clever or distinguished, whether or not it pays attention to the actual systems shaping and shaped by the described musical situation (e.g., when someone expresses her appreciation for Vinteuil's sonata in elaborate terms that nevertheless betray a complete lack of musical interest) (Deleuze 2000, 22; 52). The infancy of ekphrasis is never really opposed to or beyond 'the' systems. The music's technicality, its aesthetic discourses, its socio-psychological enmeshments, but even its physical and neurological dynamisms—they may all be directly relevant to the ekphrasis' musical apprenticeship, depending on the particular musical signs under which its descriptions operate (a 'little phrase', an instrument, an affect, a beat, a performance atmosphere). As such, this apprenticeship is a dynamic, pluriform and relational *practice* reducible to neither of the involved systems separately, and always remains capable of setting these adrift, by emitting *itself* musical signs (in response to those captured) transversally cutting through the systems' static regimes.

Instead of representing to us a sign's ultimate significance, or (in Lyotard's terms) plunging us into the ultimate, infantile abyss of its inaudible, "mutic" timbre (Ford 2021, 52ff.), the Proustian practice of music-educational ekphrasis calls for continuously repeated and shared description of a sign—any musical experience—in creative new situational correspondences that may always shift *with* the description itself. By describing, from different points of view and at different stages, in what ways the 'same' song or symphony systemically develops and semiotically captures our (a-subjective) attention, this attention itself will start to take shape as a subjective force of apprenticeship, on the lookout for other musical signs standing out in the interstitial encounters between all active subsystems.[18] Perhaps it is then precisely this 'standing out' which, *pace* Ford, also marks the potential *publicness* of the ekphrasis as an educational practice. Whereas at times Ford's account of infancy and initiation dangerously points in the direction of the same pseudo-public, if not quasi-systemic, secrecy that typifies the inner circle elitism of Proust's salons, practices like ekphrasis can only deploy their apprenticeship to the fullest in contexts that are *openly* transsystemic, such as schools and universities. By listening, playing and describing music together (and doing it again!), from *within* the encounter of its mutually imbricating systems, these settings of apprenticeship may still offer *alternatively* public and democratic platforms today, on which transformative signs are afforded a genuinely shared space and time to stand out and cut across any signifying regime trying to subdue them.

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[17] As partly opposed to Ford's own Lyotardian concepts of "idiocy" and "stupor" (Ford 2021, 30–31; 66–67).

[18] Cf. Joris Vlieghe's remarks on the work of Yves Citton (Ibid., p. 80–81).

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