



"LUIS AND HIS MOUNTAIN". A PHENOMENOLOGICAL GLANCE AT EARLY ART EDUCATION WITH MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

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This article uses the example of "Luis and his Mountain" to outline an educational science based on (bodily) phenomenology. Using Merleau-Ponty, the significance of corporeality in early childhood educational experiences and experiential processes in the field of art is highlighted. Psychological approaches in early childhood education often emphasise cognitive aspects of children's learning. Sociality, the real world and the embodiments of children's learning take a back seat. If, in contrast, experiential, bodily-phenomenological and responsive perspectives are applied, the entanglements between children and the world in asymmetrically structured educational situations can come into focus in educational settings. This perspective refers to my doctoral study entitled "*Children's aesthetic experiences in pedagogical settings. A responsive video study on Bildung and education*", (2024). There I investigate correlations between Bildung and education in pedagogical settings in the kindergarten.

1 PEDAGOGICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology has established itself as a branch of educational science and has existed for around one hundred years (Brinkmann/Kubac/Rödel, 2015, p. 1). The beginning of this phenomenological perspective was marked by a work by Aloys Fischer on "Descriptive Pedagogy" from 1914, in which the first fundamental considerations on the relationship between phenomenology and pedagogy were developed (cf. Brinkmann 2019b, 5, on Fischer 1914). In the German-speaking context, pedagogical-phenomenological perspectives can now be found in many disciplinary areas such as childhood research (e.g. Lippitz 1993; Lippitz 2003; Stieve 2008; Stieve 2017; Stenger 2015; Janßen 2020) but also school pedagogy, social pedagogy (cf. e.g. Hünersdorf Bettina/Marquardt Arwed 2019, p. 59 ff.) and cultural education (e.g. Westphal 2018) as well as in general educational science (e.g. Brinkmann 2016, p. 115 ff.; Rödel 2019) and in specialised didactics (e.g. Dietrich/Wullschlegler 2019, p. 109 ff.). Phenomenological and experiential approaches of educational science has a firm place not only in the German-speaking world, but also in the international context (cf. Brinkmann 2019b, p. 3). This means that Phenomenologie in terms of content, methodology and discipline is based on a concept of experience as developed by Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, among others.

2 MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE SORBONNE LECTURES (1949-1952)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) lived in France. He is one of the great phenomenologists of the 20th century. He was appointed as professor of child psychology and education at the Sorbonne in 1949. He represented a phenomenological and pedagogical view of children and their works, such as

children's drawings. He taught child psychology and education at the Sorbonne for three years until 1952. He did this as a philosopher. His successor was the Swiss developmental psychologist and epistemologist, Piaget. This changed the focus of the chair (cf. Waldenfels 1949-1952/1994, p. 9). In contrast to the developmental-psychological approach that characterises Piaget's thinking, Merleau-Ponty devoted himself to gestalt-theoretical approaches such as those of Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka, David Katz, Albert Michotte and Max Wertheimer (cf. *ibid.*, p. 13). Merleau-Ponty takes a critical stance against Piaget's developmental psychology approach for the following three reasons. Firstly, Merleau-Ponty opposes Piaget's idea that children's experiences are guided by a specific image of the adult. This image is based on the rationality of an adult. Piaget claims that children develop in stages from pre-rational to the rationality of an adult being (cf. *ibid.*, p. 14). Piaget's view of children as pre-rational beings skips over situational and open ways of experiencing that can be similar for children and adults. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with expanding the concept of rationality. Children are granted their own access to the world. Children's access to the world is not devalued. Thirdly, Merleau-Ponty sees children as being social and not egocentric as Piaget does. Instead, Merleau-Ponty emphasises an entanglement between the child and other people and things. He thus refers to the sociality of the child in which the child's "I seeks itself in the other and the other in itself" (*ibid.*).

3 WAYS OF TRANSLATING THE SORBONNE LECTURES

Merleau-Ponty's lectures from 1949-1952 at the Faculty of Child Psychology and Education resulted in the work "The Sorbonne Lectures". This was translated into German by Antje Kaupst in 1994. She comes from the disciplines of philosophy and the philosophy of art. The German reception of the work took place from a pedagogical perspective. It was not until 16 years later that the work was translated into English. The translator Talia Wels is a psychologist and philosopher. The reception of the Sorbonne Lectures in the English-speaking world was primarily from a psychological perspective. This is associated with differences. These will be illustrated below with a quote from those lectures translated into both German and English.

German translation: „Das Kind lebt nicht in der Welt mit zwei Polen, wie sie für den wachen Erwachsenen gegliedert ist. Es bewohnt eine hybride Zone, eine Zone der Ambiguität, in der das Oneirische¹ haust“ (Merleau-Ponty 1949 – 1952; S. 235). The translation is by Antje Kapust (1994). *The word * haust comes from the verb 'hausen'. This means a precarious state of being in a home and it connects to vulnerability.*

English translation: "The child does not live in the bipolar world of the waking adult, but rather he inhabits a hybrid zone of oneiric ambiguity" (Merleau-Ponty 1949 – 1952; S. 235). The translation is from Talia Wels 2010. The word inhabit for example does not contain the precarious state of the oneiric.

My own translation: "A child does not live in a world with two poles, as it is structured for an aware adult. They reside in a hybrid zone, a zone of ambiguity, in which the Oneirische* lives" (Merleau-Ponty 1949 – 1952; p. 235).

*oneirism = dreamlike mental state experience while awake.

4 PERCEPTION OF THE SORBONNE LECTURES FROM MERLEAU-PONTY IN GERMANY

In Germany, the Sorbonne Lectures were widely perceived in philosophical and pedagogical terms. The phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels wrote the foreword to Merleau-Ponty's lectures at the Sorbonne for the German translation. In the foreword, he emphasises as a central motif of the lectures "that childlike rationality is not to be understood as a mere preliminary stage or as a deficiency, but as the expression of a form of life of its own" (Waldenfels 1949-1952/1994, p. 11). Merleau-Ponty's analyses of children's drawing were also received by Käte Meyer-Drawe, for example, she explains that Merleau-Ponty neither regards children as innocent nor as developing in stages. She emphasises: "For him, even in his early works, children are witnesses to an experience of the world in which objectification does not dominate, but rather a lived time and a lived space" (Meyer-Drawe 2007, p. 295). In her article on the "discovery of things", Stenger, following Merleau-Ponty (1994), emphasises an "experience of the penetration of things into oneself, participation in them and coexistence with them, the relevance of things" (Stenger 2013, p. 33) (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1994, pp. 179-183).

5 RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

Children's subjective experiences emerge in an intersubjective process in which professionals attempt to initiate educational experiences for children in "pedagogical situations" (Brinkmann 2015, p. 52) through educational practices. The main research question of my study "*Children's aesthetic experiences in pedagogical settings*" was how potential relationships between pedagogical staging by professionals and children's aesthetic experiences can be described. This main question was divided into two sub-questions. The first question relates to how educational professionals attempt to initiate aesthetic experiences in kindergarten children through educational practices in educational settings. The second question was how children's experiences can be described and shown in pedagogical settings offered by professionals in the field of art/aesthetics in the practical field of visual arts. The data was analysed using pedagogical phenomenological video analysis (Brinkmann/Rödel 2018).

6 CONTEXT OF THE DATA

The analysis is based on 87 videotaped artistic-aesthetic pedagogical settings from the research project "Professionalisation of professionals in the elementary sector" (PRIMEL, Kucharz et al., 2014). In this project, kindergarten professionals throughout Germany and Switzerland were filmed at work between May 2012 and December 2013 (Wadepohl et al., 2014). The only requirement that the professionals were given for the implementation of the pedagogical settings educational programmes was that it should take around 30 minutes (ibid.). The selection of topics, content, techniques and motives as well as the social educational practices was the responsibility of the professionals (Janßen, in prep.). These 87 offers (pedagogical settings) were analysed in my dissertation study entitled "Children's aesthetic experiences in pedagogical settings. A responsive video study on Bildung and education" (Janßen 2024, in prep.) with regard to the educational and aesthetic experiences of children. First, the 87 pedagogical settings were analysed regarding the pedagogical practises of the early childhood educators with the qualitative content analysis. Based on this, ten examples were deeply analysed. In addition, further examples were produced that stood out due to the particular

intensity of their interaction between children and professionals. For reasons of space, these could not be included in the dissertation study. One of them was "Luis and his mountain". For the article, the example of "Luis and his mountain" was initially selected and described (Lippitz, 19984/2019). Examples reveal a context of meaning that contains an exemplary function for the general contained in the particular of the example (Buck, 2019). They make it possible to make a specific context of meaning fruitful in an inductive-interpretative way (Lippitz, 2003). Using the example, the children's subjective experiences are then interpreted "inductively, i.e. from experience" (ibid., p. 19) using phenomenological videography (for the methodology and procedure, see Brinkmann & Rödel, 2018). In other words, the visible, audible and tangible embodied practices described in the example are used as the basis for a responsive interpretation approach to children's experiences. Responsive interpretations of examples make no claim to completeness and also enable a self-reflective approach (Brinkmann & Rödel, 2018).

7 EXAMPLE: "LUIS AND HIS MOUNTAIN"

In the following example, the drawings and parts of the following responsive interpretation have been taken from an article I published in German (Janßen 2021).

Introduction to the example: On a snowy winter afternoon, the specialist Una sits at a table in the kindergarten with the children Mila, Lina, Lili and Luis. The children are drawing with coloured pencils on a sheet of black paper on the topic: "What would you like to do in this snowy weather?". The teacher has given them the task and had a discussion with the children beforehand.

Example: Bending over his landscape-format drawing, Luis draws a narrow, white area along the bottom edge of the page with quick, short, rhythmic strokes. His eyes follow the action of his drawing hand attentively and intently as it moves rhythmically back and forth in small steps. Luis' upper body glides sideways along the edge of the paper as he draws until his drawing hand reaches the end of his sheet of paper. A little later, Luis looks briefly at the specialist, then back to his drawing and explains weightily, pointing to his drawing with his finger: "There's the snow". With short, rhythmic strokes, he draws the shape of a bulbous, pointed mountain on the snow, which he then colours in with energetic, bold strokes in a criss-cross pattern using blue wax crayon. Una asks Luis in a clear, warm voice: "And on your mountain, do you go sledging?". Shortly afterwards, Luis silently and intently draws a sledge on the steep mountainside. Shortly afterwards, Luis raises his picture to head height next to him, points to it with his finger and tells Una with shining eyes: "And you know, I was up there and then my sledge went down there on its own".

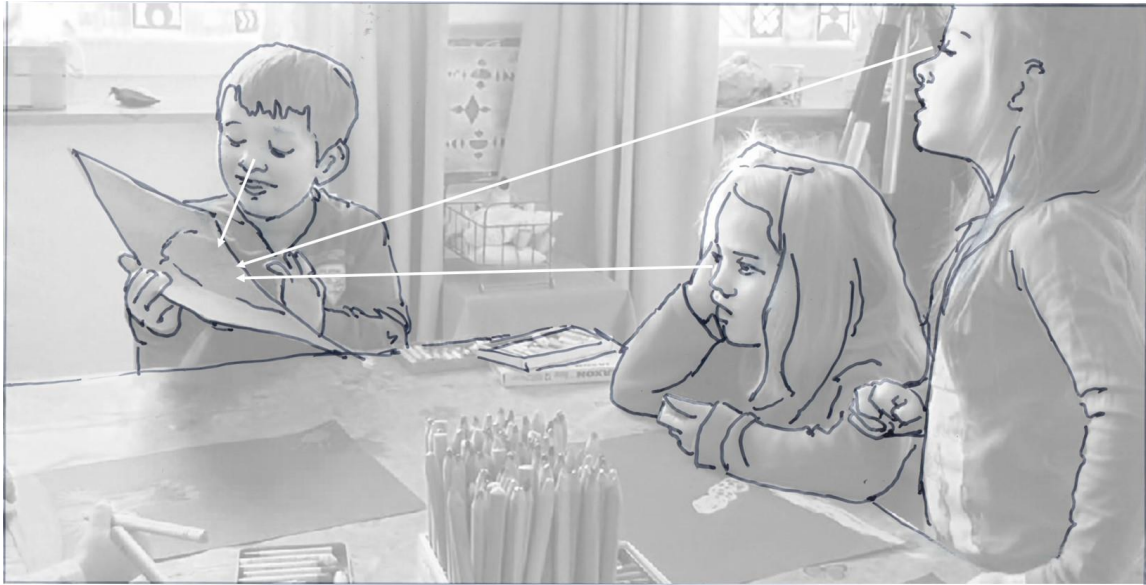


Fig. 1

Luis' finger slides steeply down the mountain in his picture (see fig. 1). Meanwhile, Mila stands up and stretches her head towards Luis. She seems to be carried away (cf. fig. 1). Lili's mouth opens, she furrows her brow and looks irritated (cf. fig. 1). Shortly afterwards, Lina (not shown in the picture) also looks at Una with her eyes wide open, as if she is unsettled.

Meanwhile, Luis puts his picture back on the table, laughing and chuckling, and looks at it with shining eyes. Una replies in a gentle tone: "Something so stupid". Lina asks in a bright, surprised-sounding voice as her eyebrows rise: "Did you get kicked out?". Luis' eyes lift to Lina, he shakes his head a little. Then he places the tip of his finger next to the mountain on the sheet of paper, slides it carefully up the sheet of paper and says in a brighter voice: "So tjüüüüüüt." Meanwhile, Una explains matter-of-factly: "Maybe he just lost the rope". Meanwhile, Luis' eyes open to Una, he shakes his head confidently and explains with conviction: "Then I rolled out of here". Luis' finger circles his picture in small synchronised circles and his head also seems to circle briefly. He continues proudly: "Then I became a snowman". While he is still speaking, Luis first bends his arms, then stretches them out to both sides, holds his breath for a moment, looks frozen and turns his eyes upwards, also freezing them briefly. Lina and Lili roll their eyes and look at Una, obviously unsettled (cf. fig. 2). Luis breaks out of his stupor, lets his gaze wander from one child to the next and to Una, picks up a pencil and starts drawing again.



Fig. 2

8 RESPONSIVE INTERPRETATION

The example is analysed below on the basis of the question of sociality in the sense of an entanglement of:

- 1) the educational practices of the early childhood educator and Luis,
- 2) the entanglements between Luis and things and
- 3) those between the child and other children.

8.1 LUIS AND THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

What would you enjoy doing in this snowy weather? The professional gives the children an overall topic and tries to stimulate the children by asking them what they would enjoy doing those conditions. To do this, they first have a conversation with the children in which they express their ideas. The specialist links a current weather situation, the snow outside, with the topic that the children are to design and symbolise in drawings. This ties in with the children's everyday experiences, as they have travelled through the snow to kindergarten that day. It also ties in with a feeling that the children should relate to when drawing; fun. A little later, the teacher reacts to the mountain that Luis has drawn. She asks him if he is sledding there. He takes up her suggestion and draws a sledge on his sheet of paper.

8.2 THE THINGS AND LUIS

The constellation of things (Meyer-Drawe, 1999) that becomes visible on the sheet of paper in the course of the drawing process: the snow, the mountain and the sledge are not only drawn, but also allow Luis to enter the scene. This constellation asserts its "claim" (Waldenfels, 2000, p. 367). Luis

reacts to it; he is taken in by it. At first Luis becomes active and informs Una that the sledge has travelled down the mountain without him. What the boy is talking about from the drawing lies in the past, it is over. But during the narration, Luis' story and the present seem to intertwine. According to Merleau-Ponty (1994), "the child [...] thinks time in the interweaving of past and present" (ibid., p. 216). This entanglement of past and present can be seen in the fact that Luis embodies the sledge with his fingertip as he slides it down the steeply sloping mountain in his drawing. Luis' experience lies in the past, the narration takes place in the here and now. The pointing gesture associated with his experience connects in a certain way the past, in which the experience may have happened to him, with the present, in which the event is revived.

8.3 THE OTHER CHILDREN AND LUIS

In these audible, visible and tangible embodiments, Luis' experience is constructed for the other children in the here and now. They respond, visibly moved. The children's facial expressions indicate that they are moved by different feelings. They appear interested, irritated or unsettled. A moment becomes visible between the children that is emotionally charged in a special way. What happens in this situation? According to Meyer-Drawe (2001), a person can see another person's feeling of amazement. This is associated with the possibility of taking over the situation in which the other person finds themselves (ibid.). In the case of the children, such an assumption seems to take place. The different feelings of the children, reflected in their postures and facial expressions, indicate an ambiguous, shared experience in relation to Luis' narration. At the same time, they contribute to shaping his narrative. This is because their visible, emotional embodiments allow his subjective response to his mountain drawing (or to an earlier experience) to emerge as a social event between the children, himself and the professional in its "ambiguity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1994, p. 325).

The child Lina, for example, seems to be so impressed that she asks about Luis' experience. Finally, Luis, as he explains, becomes "a snowman" himself, embodying it and thus also his experience of the fall. From a phenomenological perspective, the embodied practices reveal "the meaning, the quality and the horizon" (Brinkmann, 2019b, p. 137) of the person who incorporates those practices.

Luis' embodiments reveal the meaning, the quality and the horizon that can be inherent in the event of falling. His visible manifestation as a snowman can refer to various aspects. Snowmen cannot walk, they are rigid. All his clothes may have been covered in snow as a result of the fall. In addition, Luis may have felt the cold of the snow when he fell. This refers to an emotional feeling that can point to an experience of shock that freezes you in your limbs. Luis then lets his eyes slide upwards. They almost look like the fixed eyes of a snowman made of pieces of coal. Merleau-Ponty claims: "the child is neither deluded nor pretending, nor are they in an illusion, but they leave the plane of habitual life in favour of an oneiric existence that they really experience. They unrealise themselves in the role" (Merleau-Ponty 1949 – 1952, p. 68). The experience of the boy seems to be captivating, although also unsettling and irritating, as can be seen in the expressions of the children who respond to him.

9 CONCLUSION

The interpretation could show that children are interwoven with the world, with the pedagogical practices of the (art) educator, with things like sledges and mountains in time and space and with the

other children. Three aspects can be summarised for the events described: Firstly, adults, "should not treat the child's experience from above" (Merleau-Ponty 1949 - 1952, p. 244). This means that educators in the field of art should give the child space and time for his or her own experiences and embodied expression. Secondly, educators should "not turn it [the experience] into a system of concepts that are impenetrable to us", but thirdly, and also in the spirit of research, "explore the living relationships between child and adult, uncovering what makes them communicate" (ibid.).

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