

Speculating on Speculative Fiction

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APPLYING SPECULATIVE FICTION TO THE FIELD OF EDUCATION attempts to create new spaces for thinking about imagining the endeavor of education otherwise. Its semantic register includes fantasy, science fiction, horror and derivatives like gothic dystopia, weird and post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, and superhero tales. Flourishes of each are found in this special collection. Within Western literary-critical discourse, this form arises from a convergence of oppositional stands that include feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial thought. This broad range of narrative forms subvert the post-Enlightenment androcentric and colonialist mindset with its correlates of ‘truth,’ ‘facts,’ and ‘power’ imposed by exploitative global capitalism. It is an attempt to upset the contemporary framework that structures the institution of education in relation to its digital technologization; its structuring of classroom spaces; its foregrounding knowledge at the expense of affective empathy; and its surveillance and categorizations of students who are denied on sex/gendered, racial, ablest grounds in the name of impartiality, objectivity, and fairness, to rhetorically uphold equal opportunity and an education for all.

The strategies of speculative fiction require a kind of haptic non-mimetic description in which the educational researcher discovers her object of analysis by writing out its inhabited elements in space and time narratologically. It requires a speculative topological world of everyday sensibilities as lived through things; an attention to the complex emergence of worlds, the happenings of everyday life as to what matters. There is a reflexivity involved that might be described as the *perception of perception*, a doubled perception that could be given the grapheme self-refleXion (jagodzinski, 2008) where the capitalized ‘X’ targets what escapes consciousness. Here I am thinking of the pre-conscious world of sensibility, contingency, and indeterminant forces; rhythms of matter that allude us in their imperceptibility; rhythms of living that are both addictive, shifting, and repetitive that need to be arrested and examined, at least for the time of the unfolding of the story.

This X is, therefore, an *abstraction*. It can only be gotten at through speculation, projection, and atmospheric attunements. The gap (or absolute) between the subject and object is widened as the writer-researcher attempts to construct a *decorrelated world* to make us *think* otherwise. The *decorrelated* narratives of speculative fiction play with spacetime in ways that subvert normative perception. These can be compossible worlds that coexist or be true together without contradiction. They are subject to abductive logic rather than the usual inductive or deductive reasoning, where an unexpected or surprising fact becomes the focus of the story as it is an outlier phenomenon. A speculative hypothesis is entertained that is inherently creative that often plays with the near to the

distant or far future, impregnated by memories of the past as to what was, might have been, or could be. In short, the *virtual* spacetime of *recollection* is often a strategy put into play.

Quentin Meillassoux (2008) has been credited with providing the overwhelming concern with *correlationism*: thinking (subject) and being (object) as correlated to knowing is the dominant model of all post-Kantian philosophy. His claim that “contingency alone is necessary” (p. 65) opens the speculative gap (the absolute) to a “menacing power— something insensitive, and capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, ... every nightmare, or engendering random and frenetic transformations” (p. 64). The decorrelated stories of speculative fiction are prone to such a view of *radical chance*. Meillassoux presents a contingency without the need of sufficient reason. Nature has the innate capacity for any random suspension, reversal, or transformation of laws whatsoever. For the futurity of education this leads to the worries of extinction, and human extinction presents an impossible scenario that humans cannot adequately contemplate. Most often, these speculative fictional stories fall into post-apocalyptic scenarios where despair, hopelessness, and fatalism, three key emotions that are devastating to education, are played out. It is a dark, dark world where even the shadow has disappeared. The provocative abyss of the unknown results in paralysis and numbness.

The other option to extinction is just ‘the end,’ like ‘the end’ in Lars von Trier’s 2011 masterpiece, *Melancholia* where the mythological tent the children are huddled in as the cataclysmic planet approaches simply evaporates. End of hope, end of future. The other extreme is fantasy, which necessitates the dramatizing of our ability to contemplate and imagine a future at the edge of thought to offer hope as a better way of being. Here the danger leads to forms of sentimentality, Disney-like moralism, and virtuous exaggerations: idealizations that fail to acknowledge pathos and artifice as the abstraction of white light eliminate all distinctions to offer transcendence into that impossible world. Fundamentally, speculative fictions must dwell in grey zones (like Paul Klee’s (1956) *grey point*), in translucency, in curved space where continuity and discreteness are inflexed on the same plane: worlds of decorrelation that arrest action for the contemplation of the unthought.

Contra to Meillassoux’s (2008) position is both Gilles Deleuze (1968/1994) and Alfred North Whitehead (1929/1979) process philosophies, which offer significant contributions to the question of speculative fictions where there is a recovery of a sense of wonder across the range of its semantic spectrum. Together, they have become key figures for the ‘structure of feeling’ that persists today globally as to what seems to be missing in the *permacrisis* world of the Anthropocene. Affect and creativity are imbued throughout the many expressions of speculative fictions as drawn from their cosmologies. For Deleuze (along with Guattari) (1968/1996), it is the emergence of what is “remarkable, interesting and unusual” (p. 111) enfolding and unfolding in/on the place of immanence in the open evolution of the universe. This virtual dimension in contrast to Meillassoux (2008), although chaotic, is founded on the underlying conditions where the *order* of nature lies. Deleuze (1968/1994) constantly forwards sufficient reason as *dissymmetry*. It is precisely what can’t be calculated, an unknown remainder that is the source for speculative fictions. The ontogenesis of the actual is where speculation takes place as the spacetime between the before and after of creation (of becoming) is always a ‘black box.’ It can only be diagrammed via intuitive inferences that find their expression through concepts, percepts, affects and mathematical formulae.

Both Deleuze (1968/1994) and Whitehead (1929/1979) open up the realm of the virtual— Whitehead with his distinction between ‘causal efficacy’ (where the experiences of the external world impact us as physical and emotional events on our processes of becoming), and

‘presentational immediacy.’ The latter term refers to experience of the world in terms of direct sensory perception, an immediate awareness of objects in our environment. This inner and outer experience is enfolded and forms the basis of his cosmology, comprised of an ethico-aesthetic worldliness when it comes to the prehension of ‘actual occasions’ within the time of a completed process of becoming. Things matter not as to how they are represented; more significantly it is their qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements—what C.S. Peirce (1992) called Firstness—which enable an attunement to the ‘worlding of the world.’ Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of affective assemblages expands, and some say furthers, Whitehead’s initiative without the need of any theological residue of a telos or God. Their differential ontology as the proliferation of difference and connectivity that takes place in a field of potentialities forms the backdrop for *affect studies* that have penetrated the sciences and humanities alike. Speculative fiction draws specifically on the sensibilities of ‘firstness’ where creativity, *aisthesis*, and *techné* of a ‘maker’s knowledge’ are at work—the lived effect of things that look ‘back’ as it were in social-ethical-aesthetic-material-political worlding as crafted by stories, narratives that form their specific singularities. What then of education in all of this? This concerns us next.

On Education

Many educators are concerned over the potential dominance of AI to the point of hysteria. They fear that the persistent instrumentalization of algorithms leads to structuring the future of education in bleak terms where the effects in the spaces of learning have been reduced and confined to an aesthetic of ‘hyper-*Schlichtheit*,’ that is, the appropriateness of classroom design in terms of its function and form that is overlaid as edutainment through gamification theory styled ideally to a student learner’s capabilities based on the metrics of their past assessment. Affectivity of learning in this scenario has been factored in as hyper individualism—designer learning based on AI Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS). There are hundreds of them globally developed for specific tasks; the top five include Carnegie Learning, ALEKS (Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces), Knewton, ASSISTments and MATHia (Kashyapan, 2018).

The student’s preindividual bodily domain is directly targeted as the learning machine does it all for you, by way of a customized tutor. So, *enjoy* without failure! Today, the human-machine relationship as embodied in designer or ‘smart’ classrooms is referred to as *connectivist education* to promote networked, ‘creative spaces’ for learning. The ideal classroom is equipped with a broad range of supportive technologies to enhance the audio-visual *cross-platform learning* environment: projectors, eBooks and eArticles, smartboards, smart tables, laptops, tablets, mobile phones, VR for augmented reality, and virtual labs.

The dominance of algorithmic managerialism in education in our ‘clairvoyant societies’ generates speculative fictional narratives that are dystopian, leading to forms of pessimism and fatalism. A movement such as Afrofuturism, for instance, is a powerful cultural counternarrative. Perhaps this is a template for education in the broadest sense? It could address a *global paideia* in relation to the earth’s phase change that is happening, euphemistically called climate change. To break the bonds of algorithmic managerialism is to recognize, along with prominent theorists such as Luciana Parisi, Stamatia Porvanova, Beatrice Fazi and certainly N. Katherine Hayles, that algorithms present a new form of thought, an ‘alien subject’ that has its own logic (Parisi, 2013), a logic that Artificial Intelligence in Education’s (AIED) big Data has certainly exploited (as has social media capitalism). But this is not the whole story. As Parisi has it, the incomputability and

indeterminism of algorithms (what she refers to the ‘sensuous mathematics’ of ‘soft thought’) generated from the post-Turing concept referred to as Omega (Ω) developed by Gregory Chaitin, opens the door to a ‘remainder,’ an excess or surplus of sensibility, an incompleteness that opens up to infinity. Every genetic and learning algorithm contains a part that is greater than itself; that is, infinite parts, non-synthesizable quantities and unaccountable randomness that dwell between the digits 0 and 1.

For speculative fictional education to exploit this feature of algorithms shifts the unthought onto a minor plane. The sensory experience and aesthetic impact of algorithms requires a different architecture, a ‘computational aesthetics’ that is distinct from the traditional human-centered aesthetics; a machinic embodiment that alters how we perceive and interact with the world. In short, a new cosmotechnics. To think this way pedagogically is to shift the ground where the boundaries of education spill out into what might be thought of as hyper-speculative-fictional narratives of learning that confound knowledge as we know it, for it suggests the incorporation of the unknown knowns as well as the unknown unknowns that an ‘alien subject’ can provide by skewing its data sets in ways that artists, especially Trevor Paglen (2019), Hito Steyerl (2019) and Refik Anadol (2022), have already done. From this we have a transversal education that does not confine itself to ‘subjects’ but to a ‘problematic’ that runs through them (cf. Deleuze). A problematic field involves processes of ontogenesis (how things change, evolve, transform), difference (understood as productive, generative and fundamental to change), sense (as generated by paradoxes, events, processes), desire (beyond lack and representation, as affirmative productions), time (as multiple and dynamic), event (where causality, identity undergo change), and multiplicity (the functioning of a non-totalizable field). Each problematic opens many compossible decorrelated educational experiments to open up new worlds of potentiality that explore questions that require an abductive approach to knowledge, which necessarily involves speculation.

In this view, the other side of customized education is *singularity*, a minor position that sows the seeds of destruction of the current educational algorithmic assemblage. A distinction can be made between *Macht* and *Lassen* technologies as differing architectures where the first is all about control, while the second is about opening up and letting go thereby increasing potentiality. This distinction originates with Heidegger but is explored by Krzysztof Ziarek (2001) and extended in my own way throughout my work (i.e., jagodzinski, 2022). Such technologies are not opposites, rather they are enfolded or superimposed with one another, not unlike the concepts of open-closed, continuous-discrete. The key is ‘cloud ethics’ of the network of production (Amoore, 2020). Twenty-first century media (AI) present a machinic relationship where human perception and consciousness alone is not enough (Hansen 2014). Such technologies are resolutely *non-prosthetic*; their technical mediation does not correlate to any already existent faculty or capacity. Humans must engage this ‘alien subject’ given the shift that has taken place from past-directed recording platforms to a data-driven anticipation of the future, the hallmark of *clairvoyant* societies. AI can expand sensory contact with ‘worldly sensibility.’ We can attune to the world and expand sensory contact with it by learning inductively and speculatively with ‘alien’ help. Capitalist creative ontopower (Massumi, 2015) can only be countered by another ontopower, requiring the practice of intuition as a political act of learning by harnessing AI.

A countercapitalist ontopower via AI brings into relief the aesthetic dimension of life as explored by many specular fictions where the *aisthesis* of life as patterns, anomalies (unknown unknowns), and correlations are revealed that were previously unknown. Where (as Whitehead puts it) the invention of modes of compossibility to intensify learning beyond its established frames

is required. This means an ecology of education based on singularity, which involves experimenting with learning practices that lead to events of becoming for change, facing the problematic of learning and production which relies on the assistance of data-gathering and analysis. Speculative fiction in education faces the loss of agential human powers, on the one hand, but stands to gain an expansion of sensory contact on the other through *Lassen*-type technologies which form its ‘minoritarian’ force to change the current machinic assemblage that is in place.

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