The invention of the university. Eventialization, planification, invention.

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Abstract: In this paper we will explore the theoretical possibilities for writing a contemporary educational theory of the university. Drawing from insights from philosophy of time, historiographical debates, anthropology of the weather, philosophy of education, etc. we will try to develop a way of writing an educational account of the university. We will make three movements, namely eventialization, planification and invention. We will try to construct a theoretical approach that does justice to the event-like character of the university, hence the movement of eventialization, and how the university, as event, that is, as we will show, at once singular and multiple, one and dispersed, can be drawn - like an image - between different university events, hence the movements of planification and invention. In order to conceive of the history of the university in another way, we will have to do away with our classical, Newtonian conceptions of space and time, i.e. space and time as dimensions of reality in which events take place, and instead adopt a more Leibnizian relational approach, viz. one that starts from the primacy of the event and investigates the relations and correspondences between events.

Keywords: Event, university, historiography, time, Ingold, Serres.

What is contemporary educational theory?

The issue we want to address in this paper is how to write an educational theory or history concerning the university. As Bill Readings (1996) has shown, the contemporary university is in ruins and we should try to conceive of the university in a contemporary way without neglecting its rich history. In this paper we will try to develop a theoretical approach towards the issue of the contemporary university and its history. The paper is part of a broader PhD-research project and will be the starting point for further explorations. It is an attempt to find an educational way of writing about the university. As such, the reader won’t find any results or conclusions here. It is the presentation of a general research approach that brings together different insights from philosophy of time, historiographical debates, anthropology of the weather, philosophy of education, etc. in order to deal with the question how we can write a contemporary educational theory of the university? But what
would it mean to write a ‘contemporary’ educational theory? In his lecture *What is the contemporary?* Agamben defines it as follows:

This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; the contemporary is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to “cite it” according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond. It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present casts its shadow on the past so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now (Agamben, 2011, pp. 18-19).

It is part of a broader reflection on writing history in a contemporary way in which Agamben uses the image of the night sky. In the night sky we see different stars against a black background, the infinity of the universe. Agamben makes clear that what we perceive in between the stars, however, is not nothingness as such but rather the light of imperceptible stars that fails to reach us. The light of these stars which we cannot see is perceived as darkness because of the fact that the stars move apart from us with a speed faster than light. The contemporary, according to Agamben, is thus the one who is able to see a light that never reaches its destiny, the light that originates out of what is perceived as pure darkness; and moreover, the contemporary is the one who is able to transform this light, to put it in relation with other times. The contemporary is able to draw unforeseen connections between different times, to read history, but to read it differently. The contemporary cites history, uses it, in such a way that relations between different events become perceptible. He draws an image in the past, in the night sky, that makes it possible to shed a light on the darkness, that what remains invisible, of the now.

The image of the night sky is an interesting point of departure for a reflection on the ways of writing history. In this paper I will draw an analogy between writing an educational theory or history and mapping the night sky. What we see in maps of the night sky are different stars, each on its own, within the same plane. Although some stars are further away from us and therefore light needs more time in order to reach us (distance is expressed in light years), they are still depicted within the same plane. In a certain way maps of the night sky make abstraction of the dimensions of space and time. What they depict are relative positions between stars as they are visible from the earth. Sometimes lines are drawn between different stars in order to create an image or a sign, such as for instance the signs of the zodiac. Three actions are undertaken at the same moment when drawing a map of the night sky. While drawing the stars, the plane in which they are drawn comes into being, at the same moment also different relations between stars become visible. The dots on the map, the plane that they constitute and in which they are constituted, and the images that can be drawn with each a single
name, come into being in the same moment of mapmaking. This idea about the map of the night sky will guide us in our reflections on writing educational theory and history, in which we will treat (university) events such as the papal bull *Parens Scientiarum*, the inaugural lecture of Foucault, the writing style of Thomas Aquinas, the college architecture in Oxford, etc. in the same way as the stars are treated in the map of the night sky, abstracted from a specific space-time constellation, and rather as a singularity in spacetime. We have called these three movements that are part of the single act of mapmaking eventualization, planification and invention. For the sake of clarity we will describe these movements on their own but it is important to keep in mind that they take place at the same time, that they are part of the singular process of writing educational theory and history as we conceive of it. The folding out of a plane is always already an invention of concepts for the dots and lines drawn onto it, such as the invention of concepts make events in a specific way visible and draw out a specific plane in which these events and concepts appear. The notion of event, plane and concept are still a bit unclear and will be elaborated in the rest of the paper. For now it is important to retain that they don’t represent three distinctive movement but participate in the singular movement of mapmaking.

**Event and time**

*First movement: eventualization, or the multiple singularity of the event*

I will start with the first movement, namely eventualization. I start from the assumption that the university wasn’t founded, born or invented in 1088 in Bologna, a “fact” that is, by the way, also highly debated among historians (Cobban, 1975; Rüegg, 1992; Verger, 1992, 1999, 2013). Instead, I will conceive of the foundation, birth or invention of the university as an event. Now, what does it mean to think this event as an event? First, we need to define how we will use the notion of event. The event is that what happens. It is the appearing of something itself without it being reduced to a principle, system or model – ultimately idea – of which that what happens might be the expression. Thinking in terms of the event implies doing away with references to an originary idea, or essence of what a university is. Thinking the event is always an effort to give the world its character of discontinuity and multiplicity back, to think of the event, in this case the university, as a singularity. Foucault explains eventualization as follows:

> “Que faut-il entendre par événementialisation? Une rupture d’évidence, d’abord. Là où on serait assez tenté de se référer à une constante historique ou à un trait anthropologique...
immédiat, ou encore à une évidence s’imposant de la même façon à tous, il s’agit de faire surgir une ‘singularité’” (Foucault, 2001, p. 824)

To eventialize means to see that what happens is a singularity, something unique. Maybe the university “happened” in 1088 in Bologna, but it definitely happened at other places and at other moments too. I will try to do justice to the particularity of these events and not summarize them too quickly under the denominator of “university” (which would lead us to fast to thinking about the university institutionally instead of educationally). It happens always at a particular place and at a particular time and has therefore neither universal nor eternal traits but is instead singular. Since the event cannot be univocally identified, it is, at the same time as it is a singularity, a multiplicity. The event cannot be reduced as if it were the expression of a principle or idea. The happening of the event always takes place as a bundle of lines or an interweaving of which some lines refer to and correspond with other university events. Although the event is singular, it is not isolated. It needs to be seen in its correspondence with other events. Like the lines that must be drawn between different stars in order to draw a sign of the zodiac, events can be placed in correspondence with other events in order to draw an image of the university. The university is dispersed among events, its essence cannot be recovered. Or, again with Foucault:

“Suivre la filière complexe de la provenance, c’est au contraire maintenir ce qui s’est passé dans la dispersion qui lui est propre […]; c’est découvrir qu’à la racine de ce que nous connaissons et de ce que nous sommes il n’y a point la vérité et l’être, mais l’extériorité de l’accident” (Foucault, 2001a, p. 1009)

Historical research mostly tries to do away with the event, to diseventialize. This means that such a “diseventializing” history tries to explain the happening of the event by referring to different causes, as if the event is only the effect of a specific historical condition. This creates the illusion that the happening of the event is an historical necessity, as if an invisible historical process of progress is being realized through a succession of events. To eventialize, on the contrary, is to become attentive to the contingency of the event, that the event, even given certain historical conditions, could also not have happened. In this sense the event is truly an accident. No intention nor any specific cause was involved. This means that the historical gaze is reversed. The historian in this Foucauldian sense no

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1 “What would eventialization mean? A rupture of the evident, first of all. There where we were first inclined to see an historical constant, or an anthropological trait, or something obvious appearing in the same way to all of us, we need to bring a singularity into existence” (My translation).

2 “To follow the complex thread of origin means to maintain that what happened in its dispersion […]. It is to discover that at the root of what we know, there is nothing but the exteriority of the accident” (My translation).

3 “Accident” is derived from the Latin accidens, the Participium Praesens of accidere (> ad-, + cadere, to fall), to befall, happen.
longer enumerates historical circumstances that caused the happening of the event but, on the contrary, historical conditions become intelligible in the light of the happening of the event itself. The prison, to come back to Foucault, didn’t come into existence due to such and such historical conditions and causes, but on the contrary, its very invention makes society in a specific way intelligible, points our attention towards specific mechanisms of control and surveillance (Foucault, 1975). More abstract, the world is no longer an historical context in which an event is embedded as an effect of this specific context (with its social, economic, political, etc. constituents), but rather a bundle of lines of which some become perceptible due to the happening of an event. These prehensive lines, traveling through spacetime, interweave and pull into a tight knot which is the event, at once singular and multiple, one and dispersed.

Second movement: planification, or time and the weather

Taking the event as a starting point to investigate and invent a world, in this case a university, urges us to reconsider the way we see and think about time. We have seen that the event is neither universal nor eternal but that it is dispersed in its emerging as a singularity. Inspired by the reflections on time Michel Serres shared with Bruno Latour, we conceive of time, not as an arrow, but as some kind of force field:

“Time does not always flow according to a line nor according to a plan but, rather, according to an extraordinarily complex mixture, as though it reflected stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys of thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps – all sown at random, at least in a visible disorder” (Serres & Latour, 1995, p. 57).

Time is not a flowing line, nor is it a geometrical line (although time is often measured as if it is a geometrical line), but it is a plane. As such it is not a fourth dimension, added to the three spatial dimensions, of reality, but we try to see it as what comes into being when different events are related to each other. The event is a spacetime singularity, and as such a disruption of our Newtonian preconceptions about both geometrical space and historical time. The event can be explained according to these two parameters but that would be a diseventialization. To eventialize would mean that we would study the event relationally, i.e. in relation to other events (instead of as embedded in a variety of social, economic, political, etc. contexts). We thus neglect the Newtonian conception of time, namely time as having an existence of its own, independent of the events taking place within it, and rather adopt Leibniz’ relational conception of time, namely time as the illusionary connector between different events (Bardon, 2013). We will try to re-eventialize the university and to planify it, to bring different university events such as Authentica Habita in 12th century Bologna, Virchow’s
experiments in front of the lecture hall, or Jefferson’s design for the University of Virginia together in one plane. To planify doesn’t mean that we will try to plan what the university is or should be, but rather that we bring different events together in one plane, that we put them next to each other. Planification is a way of organizing events, bring them together in a way that is not chronologically. The aim is not to bring these events together in order to make them explain each other, but rather to open up our perception to their relations, their similarities and differences, the way in which we can make them correspond with each other. We will come back later to this notion of correspondence. For now it is important to maintain that the plane, or the movement of planification, is a way of bringing different events together in a way that is not explanatory, but that does justice to their singularity and accidental character. In sum, we will neglect for a moment the university as it is historically or geographically explained, and try to establish new ways of seeing and thinking, essentially to redraw the lines or the relations between these university events but to draw them differently in order to open up our perception to the event as event (and not as effect of a social, economic, political, etc. context), and to trigger our imagination concerning a different university.

In *Genèse*, Serres makes these intuitions on time more explicit. He elaborates his conception of time as non-linear:

> “Le temps, n’est pas, généralement, une ligne, quoiqu’il puisse le devenir, et alors, se mettre à choissir, à trier, à éliminer, à buissonner soudain de bifurcations: un autre temps, sur le temps, apparaît; le temps, non linéaire, est, le plus souvent, une nappe ou un champ” (Serres, 1982, p. 186).

Here, Serres argues explicitly that time is not a line but a field, a plane. Moreover, it is a field in which events occur or out of which events emerge, and as occurring/emerging draw up or shape this plane. The plane didn’t exist before the events took place, that would be a return to Newton, but it is thought in a Leibnizian way, it only exists because there are events taking place within it. Like in The Portrait of Sir Henry Unton, different life events are depicted within the same plane, not even on a line or an arrow of time. Event and plane presuppose each other. There is no plane without events, and at the same time, there are no events without a plane. Our conception of this plane is a meteorological one: There is no air without the currents of wind or without it already being a medium for the light of the

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4 “Time is usually not a line, although it may become a line. If so, then it suddenly starts to choose, to sort, to eliminate, to bifurcate: another time appears. Time, however, is more often like a sheet or a field, non-linear” (My translation).

5 The Portrait of Sir Henry Unton was painted around 1596 by an unknown artist. In the portrait, Sir Unton is depicted in the middle with around him different events of his life. These events (such as birth and death) are not arranged chronologically but are assembled in what seems to be a contingent fashion around the face of Sir Unton.
sun. In fact, as both Serres and Ingold argue there is a close resemblance between time and the weather: *Le temps*, in French, means both weather and time (Ingold, 2015; Serres, 1982). Tim Ingold argues:

“There is a pattern to the weather, and indeed to weathering, but it is one that is continually woven in the multiple rhythmic alternations of the environment - of day and night, sun and moon, winds and tides, vegetative growth and decay, and the comings and goings of migratory animals. […] Weather is an experience of time perceived not chronologically but *kairologically*: it lies, that is, not in the succession of events but in the attunement of attention and response to rhythmic relations” (Ingold, 2015, p. 71).

So, according to Ingold time is not a succession of events, as history would conceive of time, but it comes into being in the attunement of attention and response to rhythmic relations. It is not about putting events on an arrow of time, but to investigate their rhythmic relations and correspondences with each other. The plane implicates and explicates the happening of different events. This means that events emerge within a specific plane and, at the same time, that the plane becomes visible due to the different events taking place. Event and plane relate to each other in a paradoxical way. The plane comes into existence due to different events taking place, while at the same time, the happening of the events presupposes the existence of a plane. Again, an analogy can be drawn with astrophysics. In Einstein’s theory of General Relativity, the Newtonian concept of gravity is rethought according to the new insights concerning the nature of time and space. Time and space were no longer understood as the absolute conditions or dimensions of the universe, but rather as relative to speed, gravity, etc. Instead of attributing gravity to the mass of the different celestial bodies that move through an inert space, gravity is conceived of as that what comes into existence in the relations between the celestial bodies that move on this spacetime cloth that is stretched out, curved by the movements of these celestial bodies. Different stars, planets, etc. move within the same plane, causing this plane to curve. Time and space are no longer the absolute conditions for movement, but rather are affected by these movements⁶ (Bardon, 2013). As such, it is in the relations and correspondences between the events that an image of an educational phenomenon, for instance the university, can be drawn and its history (which is of course now no longer a history in the classical sense) can be written. How this image can be drawn is the topic of the next section, namely on the creation of concepts.

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⁶ For a visualization, see 6’-8’30” of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rocNtnD-yl
Third movement: invention, or an adventure of ideas, a creation of concepts

In order to draw this image, to repeat the university as event but to repeat it differently, we need to create concepts that allow us to think about the university as an event; and as such also allow thinking to become an event, viz. a rupture in the perceptible, opening up for a new, educational understanding of the university. The concepts to be created are therefore not denotative concepts (i.e. concepts that clearly describe the contours and content of an object or event (or the event as object), they don’t establish a one-on-one relationship with entities to be found, but are rather concepts that make it possible to see relations and correspondences between events, the creation of a concept is the drawing of an image, the relating of different events. The concepts are not invented ex nihilo but in relation to what matters in this specific case, viz. the university. We will try to keep to the methodological principle that Foucault (1998, 2008) calls “nominalism” and Serres calls “localized vocabulary” (Serres & Latour, 1995). What would it mean to think about the university while creating or recreating concepts like, universitas, the medieval student community, campus, the specific university architecture, or lectio, the practice of lecturing taking place in all universities. How can we talk about these concepts in a way that its meaning isn’t fixed within one single object but that it travels instead between different university events. Concepts need to indicate relations or lines, not entities; since in a world of events entities do not exist, there are only lines and their interweaving into an event. In sum, as we have seen an event is a bundle of lines, a knot; the concept is a way of relating different events, the imaginative invention of lines of correspondence. A line of correspondence is a line of similarity and difference. It is a line that draws two, three, etc. events together in order to draw out their differences and similarities. Our conception of the concept is close to what Serres calls a quasi-object:

“Dans ces réflexions sur le multiple, sur le mélange, sur les ensembles bariolés, nués, tigrés, zébrés, sur la foule, j’ai tenté de penser un nouvel objet, multiple dans l’espace et mobile dans le temps, instable et fluctuant comme une flamme, relationnel” (Serres, 1982, p. 152).7

Serres expresses here that the concept is multiple in space and mobile in time, that it is relational. The first part of this expression may be a bit disturbing because Serres seems to keep to the presupposition of absolute space and time. The most important part to retain is that the concepts are relational, that they tie different events together that were in a classical vision on time and space unrelated. As such Serres can say, keeping to these Newtonian conceptions of space and time, that the quasi-object, or in our case the concept, is multiple in space and mobile in time. What we will do can be called an imaginative mapping of the university. The map, which is an image, to be drawn, however, is not like

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7 “In these reflection on the multiple, on the mixture, on the multicolored, naked, tigrish, zebrish ensembles, on the masses, I have tried to think a new object, multiple in space and mobile in time, unstable and fluctuating like a flame, relational” (My translation).
a map of a land (with different regions and cities, connected by roads, rivers, etc.) but, as we have said in the beginning, a map of the night sky. Although some stars are more far away than others, like some events are more far away in history than others, they are still visible in the same sky. It shows different events in the same plane, although they all have their own ‘geometrical’ temporality, and indicates, like a map of the stars indicates for instance the signs of the zodiac, a specific relation between different stars, the lines that can be drawn between these events, which are the lines of correspondence. It is a map with lines and figures, with constellations. A specific image is drawn, a relation and correspondence between events.

Again, we need to come back to the specific interrelations and mutual presuppositions of event, plane and concept. We have dealt with them now in a chronological way. As if we start from the events, thereafter draw the plane and in the end, draw different relations between these events that are brought within the same plane. In actual case, this enterprise is as we have argued in the beginning a bit more complex and the three different movements are in fact highly interrelated. They participate in the single movement of mapmaking. In a similar vein as the descriptions of the events presuppose a plane in which they take place (like the celestial bodies presuppose a cloth of spacetime), and, the other way around, the plane presupposes different events (like the celestial bodies curve and warp spacetime thus shaping it), do the concepts presuppose the happening of events and the existence of the plane, while, the other way around, the creation of concepts is the drawing of an image of this plane by relating some events while leaving others out of consideration. Specific events make it possible to draw a specific image, but also, a specific image makes these events perceptible in a specific way. In sum, it is not as if we would first have a bunch of events, than bring them together in a plane and conclude with drawing some relations between events, but rather eventialization, planification and invention are part and parcel of the same imaginative process of educational theorizing.

The invention of the university

Educational theory, and maybe all theory, is an imaginative enterprise, and we should be aware that it is imaginative. Imagination emerges via abstractions which frame life, and produce life, also university life, in one way or another. John Dewey even calls it an ‘organ of nature’. “Although imagination is often fantastic it is also an organ of nature; for it is the appropriate phase of indeterminate events moving toward eventualities that are now but possibilities” (Dewey, 1958, p. 62). Theory, as we have argued, has always to do with imagination. As such it is a natural phenomenon. It is one of the ways in which the world transforms itself. Truth, for theory, is not to be found in

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8 It is interesting that this distance is expressed in light years.
correspondences between enunciations and the world, but is rather produced in, due to, and together with these transformations of the world. We should pay attention to the ways in which our educational theory is productive of modes of life in and for the university. Educational theory (as well as history) is imaginative because it imagines an educational phenomenon - in this case the university.

"Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts. It works by eliciting the general principles which apply to the facts, as they exist, and then by an intellectual survey of alternative possibilities which are consistent with those principles. It enables men to construct an intellectual vision of a new world" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 93).

Educational theory is an attempt to find words in order to describe the phenomenon being studied. At the same time, it tries to open up other possibilities, other ways of seeing and perceiving. It is a way of describing facts in such a way that we can imagine another university that is, however, still a university.

In order to bring this paper to an end, I will summarize the purpose of our research, it would be (1) to invent concepts that make it possible to talk and write about the university as an event, (2) to make thinking about the university an event in itself which opens up the perceptible and the possibility of an imaginative theory of the university, and (3) to invent a university together with the invention of the conditions of its future invention. The aim is not to discover the university, as if there would be an underlying principle of which all existing universities would be instantiations, but to invent the university; it is not to write the “real” story of the university, but to draw an image of the real university (so both the actual and the virtual), one that allows to address its different “problematics”, such as for instance how to live together, share a common world and communicate it to others.

In sum, we wish to come to an educational theory about the university that draws an image of the university by referring to different university events described in their multiple singularity (instead of as explained by their social, political, economic, etc. context), to bring these events within the same plane (instead of on an historical line of time) and to make these events correspond with each other, draw out similarities and differences. It is our hope that such an educational theory allows for a different, an educational, imagination of the university.

Bibliography


