



Vergessene Zusammenhänge: Über Kultur und Erziehung (The Forgotten Relation: About Culture and Education) by Klaus Mollenhauer, München:

Juventa Verlag, 1983

Reviewed by

Bas Levering

University of Utrecht

Klaus Mollenhauer is not the first scholar who criticizes the view that during the Middle Ages one did not see the childlikeness of children. However, his book *Vergessene Zusammenhänge* (The Forgotten Relation) is especially exceptional in its argumentation and in its approach to the question of the relation between pedagogy and culture. Mollenhauer addresses the issue of the notion of “susceptibility to influence” of children, something that Herbart called *Bildsamkeit*—the plasticity of human beings to grow, change, or develop depending on the cultural contexts in which they live. In order to formulate his problem, Mollenhauer uses, for example, the “Madonna with Child” of the mosaic from San Appolinare Nuovo’s basilica at Ravenna of the year 550, as interpretive material to examine and analyze the medieval view of childhood. The child sits on his mother’s lap with his back to the mother. Both mother and child look at us. It is immediately apparent that the child lacks childlike features. He is really portrayed as a miniature adult. Mollenhauer argues that external or physical differences between adults and children were not considered important because the process of childrearing was seen to be an *internal* rather than an *external* process. Using documentary materials he also shows that adults were not indifferent toward children, but that children were viewed as equals, as equal before God.

Two fifteenth century images give witness to the transition to modern times. Donatello’s “Madonna and Child” look at each other. In this case, the child does not only appear smaller, he especially gives the impression of being vulnerable. This child needs the protective hands of the mother to hold. A more secular version of the adult-child relation is provided by Ghirlandajo’s painting of a grandfather and his grandchild. In this representation, too, the external physiognomy betrays the internal mood. There is a skepticism in the glance of the grandfather which gives us the impression of an understanding of a future which is open and uncertain. The face of the child, in turn, is full of trust and curiosity. It betrays the ardent desire to grow up. In Mollenhauer’s words: “Between child and grandfather there is a relation of growth, learning and development—they are united in love, but with respect to the future, which they anticipate

in their own uniquely personal ways, they are separated from each other" (p. 95).

What is new in Mollenhauer's presentation? Neither the pictures nor the use of literary quotes are new—the clarifying effects of these devices have been discovered by other authors already. However, one gets the impression that until now they have been used only as illustrations, as commentary to material that finds its conceptualization in different sources. Mollenhauer does not illustrate, he interprets. He needs to take detours by way of the products of fine arts and literature in order to see things that are otherwise unnoticeable. Thus he is able to enlighten us about education. Mollenhauer's cultural-historical narrative ensures that we may have something to say about forgotten relations. His interpretations fascinate the reader even when at times they may seem somewhat excessive.

At first sight neither the composition of the book nor the theories that Mollenhauer advances may strike us as enormously revealing. His argument is that educators cannot make themselves redundant; that education is only possible where educators are self-reflective about their own views and values and about the way they live with children. Neutrality in these matters is impossible. What we show children through our own lives is what Mollenhauer calls "presentation." As social reality becomes more and more complex, the way that reality is presented to children, therefore, becomes more problematic as well. The contemporary problem is that one cannot take for granted that what we present to children with our own lives is appropriate or good. This, then, is a problem of "representation," as Mollenhauer calls it, of selecting what we must pass on to children. And the problem of representation is not limited to the forms of life that adults hold up to children for their acceptance and adoption. It is a general pedagogic concern to deal with the question of how the appropriate things are to be learned by children in the appropriate manner. What matter is important and relevant? How can that be made representational? How can I motivate the child? Mollenhauer argues that the child's "susceptibility to influence" is not a factual affair but a disposition which only manifests itself expressively as a reaction to particular expectations. An external stimulus is needed to foster self-reflectivity. The adult must pose challenges to prod the child in the direction of increasing independence, says Mollenhauer. For this one needs an attentive awareness of the difference between what is possible and what is actual. He shows that the way in which we should be interpretively involved in the child's subjectivity is not unlike the way we determine the meaning of a work of art.

Mollenhauer's text provides an alternative to the disappointments following the high expectations that technological and management oriented educational programs generated during the sixties and

seventies. It is also a response to the so-called antipedagogy movement that has exercised some impact on the educational community in Germany and the Netherlands. Proponents of the antipedagogy movement see all education (at home and at school) as forms of oppression. The manner in which the problems around the concept of "identity" have been discussed in the last decade makes clear what purpose a varied historical detour needed to serve. Mollenhauer argues that identity really only exists as fictional entity because people are always uncertain about their self-image. For educational theory there are no identities; there are only identity problems.

However, the point is not that such formulations teach us something important but that they show us the artful detours which are our real subject matter. A series of self-portraits inevitably yield insights into the meaning of identity since the painter does not only look at and come face to face with us but also with himself. In literature, too, one can find drastically altered conceptions of self. Whereas Plato's Socrates emphasized in his "Apology" that over the years of his life he has remained the same, Brecht's more modern personage of Keuner is startled when he is told that over the years he "has not changed a bit."

It is interesting to apply the notion of identity to Mollenhauer's biography. His identity as social scientist and educator has not remained the same over the past 25 years. His earliest writings clearly belong to the hermeneutic tradition of pedagogical theorizing in Germany. Gradually his thinking evolved in the direction of the so-called critical pedagogy movement in Germany for which he helped to formulate its program and its concepts. More recently, and with this book, Mollenhauer seems to have returned to an interest in the *Geisteswissenschaftliche* or hermeneutic tradition in education. But the last turn can also be seen as a product of a general trend. Today's German human science moves in the direction of art and literature.

Note

1. This article was translated and edited by Max van Manen.