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PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS | KAZALO

INTRODUCTION | UVOD

Andrzej Wierciński

Phronetic Education to Integrity. Capability, Courage, and Passion for Thinking 5

Fronetično izobraževanje na poti k integriteti. Sposobnost, pogum in strast za mišljenje

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION | FILOZOFIJA IZOBRAŽEVANJA

Michał Federowicz – Daniel R. Sobota – Jarosław Gara

Education as a Problem Vis-à-Vis the Question about Education 17

Izobraževanje kot problem z ozirom na vprašanje o izobraževanju

Oreste Tolone

The “Introduction of the Subject.” Anthropology, Medicine, Education 53

»Vpeljava subjekta«. Antropologija, medicina, izobraževanje

Carmelo Galito

Schools without Quality? Elements for a Phenomenological Exploration of the Concept of Quality in Education 69

Šole brez kakovosti? Elementi za fenomenološko raziskavo koncepta kakovosti v izobraževanju

Mindaugas Briedis

Phenomenology of Online Education. The Other’s Look (J.-P. Sartre) and Intersubjective Perceptual Phantasy (E. Husserl) 93

Fenomenologija spletnega izobraževanja. Pogled Drugega (J.-P. Sartre) in intersubjektivna perceptivna domišljija (E. Husserl)

Małgorzata Hołda

The Imperative of Phronetic Education for Practicing Freedom in Light of the Bible’s Literary Discourse 115

Imperativ fronetičnega izobraževanja za udejanjanje svobode v luči bibličnega literarnega diskurza

Urszula Zbrzeźniak

In Whose Name? Some Reflections on the Notion of Voice in Philosophy and Education 139

V čigavem imenu? Nekaj refleksij o pojmu glasu v filozofiji in pedagogiki

Katarzyna Dworakowska		
The Foucauldian Art of the Self and the Pedagogic Problem		167
<i>Foucaultovska umetnost sebstva in pedagoški problem</i>		
Anna Zielińska		
Dilemmas of Education for Democratic Imperatives and Good Citizenship		193
<i>Dileme izobraževanja za demokratične imperative in zgledno državljanstvo</i>		
Anna Wilkomirska		
Democratic Values and Patriotism. The Educational Challenge		211
<i>Demokratične vrednote in patriotizem. Izobraževalni izziv</i>		
Paulina Sosnowska		
Tragedy, Solidarity, and Impartiality. The Meaning of Hannah Arendt's Thinking for Our Narrational Identity		239
<i>Tragedija, solidarnost in nepristranskost. Pomen misli Hannah Arendt za našo narativno identiteto</i>		
Tomaž Grušovnik		
Education and Active Ignorance		259
<i>Izobraževanje in hotena nevednost</i>		
Jernej Kaluža		
The Rejection of Teaching in Philosophy. Deleuze, Nietzsche, and Stirner		279
<i>Zavračanje poučevanja v filozofiji. Deleuze, Nietzsche in Stirner</i>		
Ramsey Eric Ramsey		
Before the Work of Art. Education as Yielding to Art's Address		307
<i>Pred umetniškimi delom. Izobraževanje kot predajanje nagovoru umetnosti</i>		
Tina Bilban		
The Potential Role of Literature in Overcoming the Denialism of Ageing		323
<i>Potencialna vloga književnosti pri premagovanju zanikovanja staranja</i>		
REVIEWS RECENZIJE		
Małgorzata Przanowska: Listening and Acouological Education (<i>Andrej Božič</i>)		355

CONVERSATION | RAZGOVOR

- Małgorzata Hołda
**The Poetics of Education. In Conversation with Andrzej Wierciński's
*Hermeneutics of Education*** 361
*Poetika izobraževanja. V razgovoru s Hermenevtiko izobraževanja Andrzeja
Wiercińskega*

REPORT | POROČILO

- Andrej Božič
Fragility of Existence 385
Krhkost eksistence
- Manuscript Submission Guidelines* 389
- Navodila za pripravo rokopisa* 393

THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF LITERATURE IN OVERCOMING THE DENIALISM OF AGEING

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Abstract

Ageing affects the way we perceive the world; it is a part of our identity and a part of our social role. However, the denialism of ageing prevents us to openly discuss ageing, to project our own old age and direct our society into an inclusive, intergenerational future. Thus, it is necessary to identify how denialism presents itself within contemporary society and to identify pedagogical praxes with the potential to address denialism and to help us overcome it. We propose literature can offer us an

insight into the life-world we meet in and thus help us identify the denialism of ageing and the different forms it takes on. Furthermore, we propose quality literature can help us open an intergenerational dialog on ageing and provide an alternative to denialism. The identified forms of denialism of ageing and the opened intergenerational dialog on ageing can be employed as a footing for further philosophical consideration of the structures of the experience of ageing, as well as for the outline of a gerontological ethics that could direct our projection of a future society.

Keywords: ageing, denialism of ageing, literature, children's literature.

Potencialna vloga književnosti pri premagovanju zanikovanja staranja

Povzetek

324 Staranje zadeva način, na katerega zaznavamo svet; je del naše identitete in naše družbene vloge. Vendar nam zanikovanje staranja preprečuje, da bi odkrito razpravljali o staranju, da bi načrtovali našo starost in usmerjali našo družbo proti inkluzivni, medgeneracijski prihodnosti. Zato je potrebno identificirati, kako se zanikovanje kaže znotraj sodobne družbe in kakšne pedagoške prakse imajo potencial, da nagovorijo zanikovanje in nam ga pomagajo premagati. Predlagamo, da nam književnost lahko ponudi uvid v življenjski svet, v katerem se srečujemo, in nam tako pomaga prepoznati zanikovanje staranja in različne oblike, ki jih privzema. Nadalje predlagamo, da kakovostna književnost lahko pripomore pri odpiranju medgeneracijskega dialoga o staranju in ponudi alternativo zanikovanju. Identificirane oblike zanikovanja staranja in odprti medgeneracijski dialog o staranju lahko uporabimo kot osnovo za nadaljnje filozofsko preiščljanje struktur izkustva staranja in za načrtovanje gerontološke etike, ki bi lahko usmerjala načrtovanje prihodnosti družbe.

Ključne besede: staranje, zanikovanje staranja, književnost, otroška književnost.

1. Introduction

Ageing can be considered one of the most fundamental phenomena of contemporary society. It co-defines our lives and our perception of the world around us. We all age, the ageing process affects our physiological and mental abilities; it affects the way we perceive the world and the way others perceive us. Furthermore, our perception of ageing itself is similarly complex, as Donovan writes in his essay on “Phenomenology of Aging”:

aging is a set of interior or subjective experiences, as well as a set of biological processes [...] Aging is also a relational process [...] We construct, and in some measure negotiate, the meaning of aging with others and with the world around us. (2015, 165)

Age is intrinsic to our personal identity (Bavidge 2016) and at the same time to some extent performative, as we attach culturally determined meaning to biological age and enact certain age roles (Joosen 2018).

Today, ageing does not only affect us on a personal level. Advances in science, public health, and rising standards of living, including better education, improved nutrition, and lifestyle changes, have caused a significant rise in life expectancy and therewith connected phenomenon of the ageing society. Faced with the depth of the forthcoming changes, it is becoming ever clearer that we have to actively guide them if we would like future generations to live in a well-functioning intergenerational and socially inclusive society.

One of the main obstacles to such a future is the denialism of ageing. As indicated by Thomas Kirkwood in his review of the science of human ageing *Time of Our Lives*, in our contemporary society, where ageing and death have become institutionalized, where real death and ageing, not “Hollywood fantasy death” (1999, 12), are rarely seen, fear of death and ageing is rising. We have deported death and ageing out of our lives and we feed our children the “they lived happily ever after” story (Kirkwood 1999). According to Eviatar Zerubavel, fear is one of the main causes of denialism. “Fear,” he writes, “is also one of the main reasons underlying the abundance of euphemisms used in reference to the terminally ill (‘when this is over’) and the dead (‘passed away,’ ‘gone’).” (2006, 6)

It seems that fear of death and fear of ageing go hand in hand. However, while fear of death has always been a part of human cultures, comprehensively reflected within different philosophical systems (e.g., Plato 2011; Freud 1920; Heidegger 1927; Camus 1955, Kierkegaard 1980), fear of ageing has only lately and still quite rarely become a subject of philosophical discussion.

326 While death is the event that demarcates the boundary between life and non-life, life and nothingness, or life and whatever we believe or hope comes after the life as we know it, ageing is essentially a part of life, though the part of life that brings us closer to death as its end. In his essay “Coming to Terms with Old Age—and Death,” Christopher Cowley sees “the virtue of the immanence of death” as one of the factors that define old age (Cowley 2016, 191). However, there are some essential differences between fear of death and fear of ageing. Death is inconceivable, it is not an event in life (Wittgenstein 1961, § 6.4311) and we cannot even imagine our own death (Freud 2001, 304). We are faced with the fact that all men are mortal, however, as we accept this as an abstract logical proposition, we often live denying it on a personal level. The phenomena of ageing, on the other hand, is familiar to us, as Bavidge describes it: “Aging is a slow, familiar process—more of the same, only worse.” (2016, 208) We perceive symptoms of ageing as we meet the others and we get some sense of the changes to come as we experience the past and current changes. However, what we miss is the (first-person) experience of being older as such. Furthermore, while death is something that awaits all of us, ageing is not. It can be avoided by a premature death. However, while afraid of ageing, not many of us would like to avoid ageing in such (though apparently the only possible) way. Exact thematization of these differences between fear of death and fear of ageing, goes far beyond the scope of this text.

However, there is a further, historical difference between the two: while fear of death has been always present in human culture, fear of ageing is symptomatic of our contemporary society. It is connected, on the one hand, with significant rise in life expectancy (see for example: World Health Organization 2019; Our World in Data 2019) and an ageing society, and on the other hand, with the disintegration of extended families, which pushed ageing out of sight.

Denialism of ageing, the fact that we actively and all-pervasively avoid discussing the process of ageing and old age, does not, however, implicate

the unimportance of the subject matter. On the contrary, it denotes how important the phenomenon of ageing actually is. According to Zerubavel, conspiracies of silence do not revolve around “largely unnoticeable matters we simply overlook,” instead we crave to deny crucial aspects of our reality, which actually beg for our attention (2006, 9). These are the elephants in the living-room, which we pass every day and we walk carefully around them, avoiding the swinging trunks and the enormous feet (2006, 10).

In her 2007 monograph, Muriel R. Gillick illustrates the extent of denialism of ageing with the amount of money spent in USA to cover up the symptoms of ageing:

When we believe we will stay young forever, and when we purchase special vitamins, herbs, and other youth-enhancing chemicals to promote longevity, we are engaging in massive denial. [...] Americans spend an extraordinary \$ 6 billion each year on “anti-aging” nostrums [...]. We also spent an exorbitant amount of money covering up the stigmata of old age. The use of hair color is so ubiquitous that I could not find any estimates of the amount of money spent on vanquishing the gray. (Gillick 2007, 3)

327

The more we deny it, the more our fear of ageing grows. We are afraid of the changes to come, which we perceive as the changes for the worse. We are afraid we will lose our physical abilities, our independence, our role within the society and within the family; we are afraid we will lose our colleagues, friends, and relatives (as Cowley argues, the death of our friends and family, e.g., our parents, is one of the factors that define old age; 2016, 191). We are afraid of pain that accompanies the process of ageing and therewith connected diseases. However, denying the fear, all these issues usually stay unaddressed.

Ageing, an indispensable part of our subjective and inter-subjective reality, is recognized as a burden. Thus, any comprehensive attempts to address our personal attitude towards ageing as part of our identity, of our perception of the world and the others, and any comprehensive attempts to project a well-functioning intergenerational and socially inclusive future society, has to address this denialism. Here, however, we are faced with two challenges.

The first challenge is to recognize denialism. How can we identify something, which is missing? This is, according to Zerubavel, one of the main reasons for the lack of academic attention to denialism: “After all, it is much easier to study what people do discuss than what they do not (not to mention the difficulty of telling the difference between simply not talking about something and specifically avoiding it)” (2006, 3)

The second challenge concerns the necessary pedagogical praxis built upon this basic research: how to overcome the denialism of ageing? In the case of a well-established denialism, “society provides ‘cognitive traditions’ which establish what to pay attention to and what to ignore.” Consequently, pedagogical interventions that aimed to address the denialism at the individual’s level in order to help individuals to overcome it and change their behavior practice, were often only partly successful (Spannring and Grušovnik 2018).

We propose that literature with its specific character (closely presented in chapter 2) can help us successfully address both challenges: the identification of denialism (a research, presented in chapter 3) and its overcoming (projects including workshops, presented in chapter 4).

2. Literature and its potential role in overcoming the denialism of ageing

Literature, with its complex character, not subordinated to one particular purpose, but intertwining ethical, aesthetic, and cognitive components, can, among others, provide us the most complex insight into the life-world,¹ we meet in. An art-work, in our case an art-work of literature, exposes the presented phenomenon for what it is, not solely as a means serving a particular purpose; it forces us to consider it from different perspectives, to exceed the self-evident (e.g., Heidegger 1950). The art-work confronts us with our own perception of the world around us—it can reveal the denied elephant in the living-room or, equally potent, a black spot with which we strive to cover the elephant.

The same goes for children’s literature. Its specific character, defined by its specific target public, however, makes it particularly appropriate for the identification of the denied elephants: although quality children’s literature is often multi-layered, the authors are generally more direct in their story-telling

and avoid exceedingly hermetical language. Furthermore, children's literature often combines different means of communication, e.g. text and illustrations. If the author succeeds to avoid the elephant at one level, it might reveal itself on another or in combination of the both.

There exists another very important aspect of children's literature: more or less in all cultural contexts, children's literature (or before the use of this term, any literature read to children) has been considered as a matrix that can influence the young, and through them, the future; e.g., see Plato (2008, 377b–383c) for the Ancient Greek perspective on storytelling; O'Dell (2010, 3–4) and Townsend (2003, 32) for the analysis of the Victorian understanding of children's literature and O'Dell (2010) and Svetina (2011) for the analysis of children's literature as an indoctrination tool of the main ideologies of the 20th century. In the 21st century, children's books, where other components are subordinated to the ethical perspective of the book, are considered low quality. However, as fierce public debates reveal, legal guardians, educators, and others involved in childcare are very concerned about potential influences children's literature might have on the well-being of children as well as on their perception of the world and projection of their own future (Pišek 2018; Rannard 2017). Children's literature exposes children to social values of their contemporary society (Crabb and Bielawski 1994; Weitzman et al. 1972; Ansello 1997), it molds "future adults who will accept it" or infuses children with values "that may help to reconstruct the society" (Council on Interracial Books for Children 1976). Quality literature presents different aspects of the phenomena in question, it provides children with a holistic view (McGuire 2016) and has the ability to determine the future of children's attitude towards the described phenomena (Hollis-Sawyer and Cuevas 2013; Gooden and Gooden 2001; Bandura 2001). "Literature both reflects and creates," claims Edward F. Ansello in his 1997 article in which he analyzes the presentation of age and identifies ageism in children's literature (Ansello 1997, 256).

329

We aim to show that due to these specific characteristics of literature it can also help us address the main challenges connected with the overcoming of the denialism of ageing. Based on a premise that the analysis of literature can provide us with an insight into our life-world and help us with the identification of the denialism of ageing and the form it has in contemporary society, we have

conducted an analysis of the presentation of ageing in children's literature. Furthermore, based on a premise that literature affects the way we perceive life-world and act within it, we have used quality literature that depicts ageing and age at workshops with which we aimed to open a dialog on ageing and provide an alternative to denialism.

3. Analysis of contemporary children's literature: the identification of the denialism of ageing

330 In 2014, we conducted a study on the contemporary presentation of ageing in picture books (for the more detailed description of the research, see Bilban 2014), with focus on books published since 1990 in the U.K. and in Slovenia, which enabled a further comparison between the two countries with a common European context, but some differences in the state of the science of ageing within the country (the U.K., on one hand, has been one of the leading forces in research regarding ageing and has established a culture of communication between scientists and the lay public; on the other hand, in Slovenia research of ageing and scientific communication is only beginning to get established) and the publishing market (the majority of picture books published in the U.K. are originally written in English, most of them by the U.K. writers, while the majority of picture books published in Slovenia are translated).

As our main resources we used the Booktrust collection at Newcastle University's Robinson Library and the archive of Pionirska, Centre for Youth Literature and Librarianship, City Library Ljubljana; both are considered the most complete collections of recent and contemporary children's books in their countries. First, we examined the picture books for any descriptions of ageing or older people, either as main or visible supporting characters.² In total, we identified 104 books about ageing or/and older people published in the U.K. and 73 published in Slovenia. This selection presents the core of our analysis

² We additionally complemented the selection with picture-books recommended by experts for children's literature from Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books in the U.K., and Pionirska, Center for Youth Literature and Librarianship. Due to our methodology, the selection might not be complete, however, it is probably the most thorough and extensive selection of contemporary U.K. and Slovenian picture books dealing with ageing.

with which we aim to identify the potential denialism of ageing and the form it has in contemporary society.

3.1. Analysis of selected titles

In the analysis, we focused on two aspects which we propose are significant for the identification of the denialism of ageing: the general emplacement of the elderly in the story and specifically the presentation of biological ageing³ (e.g., physiological symptoms of ageing or age related disease, etc.). The symptoms of biological ageing confront us with the unembellished reality of ageing and are the most difficult to deny. Thus, we proposed, denialism will be most obvious in relation to the presentation of the biological aspects of ageing.

The analysis revealed that, in general, in picture books published in Slovenia and the U.K., older people are presented as the main characters, e.g., in books about grandfathers and grandmothers or a remarkable older neighbor. They are very rarely presented as being part of a child's everyday life or included in the stories as an integral part of the described family or society, as someone who simply happens to be old.

331

In original Slovenian picture books, grand parents often have the role of surrogate parents. They enjoy their time with grandchildren; they often cook or read together; however, they are responsible for the grandchildren's safety and well-being and behave accordingly mature. In picture books published in the U.K., however, younger and older people are often described in a similar manner, as the opposition to serious, realistic, hard-working, and busy middle-aged. Older people often step out of the world of work, career, and production, but gain access to the world of mystery and magic, (forbidden) adventures, or simply of free time, silence, and contemplation, which they often share with children. The semblance between children and the elderly and its presentation in popular media such as (children's) literature and film has been comprehensively analyzed by Joosen, who writes in her "Introduction" to the volume: "The equation of childhood and old age always has implications

³ According to Smith's definition, which is well accepted in the field of biology, ageing is "a progressive, generalized impairment of function resulting in a loss of adaptive response to stress and an increasing probability of death." (1962)

for the generations in between, which are often characterized in contrast to the young and the old.” (Joosen 2018, 7)

This aspect is introduced into Slovenian cultural space by translated picture books, e.g., the ones originally written in English, for example, Ian Whybrow’s series *Harry and His Bucket Full of Dinosaurs*.

Furthermore, in the Slovenian and U.K. picture books older people often have a special position within the society due to their specific wisdom, and sometimes a different, more rudimentary perspective, as for example in the Slovenian folk tale *Pšenica najlepši cvet / Wheat the Most Beautiful Flower* (1995).

332 The selected picture books from Slovenia and U.K. mostly share a common attitude towards the presentation of the biological aspects of ageing. In illustrations, the elderly usually show stereotypic characteristics of old age, which are directly connected with biological ageing: they have grey hair and wrinkles and might need a walking stick. However, biological ageing is very rarely brought into focus and these characteristics of old age (e.g., the loss of mobility) are rarely discussed. Only a few of all the selected picture books touch upon biological ageing. Among the selected 104 picture books published in the U.K., only three describe older people with a disease and a further three the process of dying. Among 73 Slovenian books, two describe older people with a disease and a further two the process of dying.⁴

Most of the books that present older people with a disease focus on the presentation of age-related diseases. We have, however, identified two exceptions: Ian Whybrow’s *Harry and the Robots* (2000) and Emica Antončič’s *Dedek ima gripo / Grampa Got the Flu* (1993). Both picture books manage to present the selected disease, a flu in one case and less specified, but more serious respiratory disease in another, accurately and realistically. Respiratory diseases are common with younger as well as with older people, which means that presentation of older character with respiratory disease is very accurate from the biological perspective and at the same time offers a good platform for the child’s understanding—they all had cough once, they already have a preconception about what is going on. However, it is not the disease, which

4 One of them, Nigel Gray’s *Little Bear’s Granddad* (1999) / *Medvedkov dedek* (1999), was translated into Slovenian from English and was present in both national selections.

is in the focus of the book, but the warm and caring relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is also in the focus of the three picture books presenting elderly with age-related diseases. All three books present a grandparent with dementia. It is one of the diseases that came into focus of social concern and scientific studies with the recent increased longevity of the world's population. Dementia is "defined as an acquired global impairment of cognitive function, sufficient to impinge on everyday activities, occurring in clear consciousness" (World Health Organization; American Psychiatric Association 1993), with memory impairment as an essential component of the diagnosis (Woods 2005). People with dementia often lose parts of their memory, such as the recognition of beloved ones, and the ability to express their feelings. These disturbing consequences of dementia can seriously affect children, thus, the focus on the changing relationship between a child and his/her grandparent with dementia, taken by the authors of the three picture books, is not surprising.

333

In *My Little Grandmother Often Forgets* (2007), Reeve Lindbergh manages to create a touching and emotional story about the relationship between a boy and his ageing grandmother, combined with a very exact presentation of the physiological signs of dementia and its immediate consequences. However, the same does not hold for the other two picture books. In *Mile-High Apple Pie* (2005), Laura Langston bases her presentation of dementia on the wrong symptoms as the main character's grandmother starts mixing concepts within the same categories, e.g., apples with pears, which is not characteristic for any type of dementia. In *Recept za ljubezen / A Recipe for Love* (2012) of Mojiceja Podgoršek we follow a story of a little girl and her grandparents, who leave their home for a nursing home because of their illness. The grandfather is first hospitalized because of serious problems connected with dementia but shows no symptoms of dementia later in the story. The story thus implies that his condition improved, which is, in the case of dementia, unfortunately impossible. In both picture books, focused on social and emotional aspects of the relationship between a child and the elderly person, the scientific aspect is left behind, leaving young readers with an inaccurate image of dementia.

While death is not a particularly rare topic of children's picture books, authors often focus, not on death itself, but on the time after death (see Leavy 1996; Durant 2004) or present death metaphorically (see Puttock 2006). Four books from our selection presented the process of dying itself, including some elements of biological ageing: Margaret Wild's *Old Pig* (1995), David Macaulay's *Angelo* (2002), Nigel Gray's *Little Bear's Granddad* (1999) / *Medvedkov dedek* (1999) and Antonie Schneider's *Mislili bomo nate, babica / We Will Think of You, Grandma* (2010). In all four books, the elderly characters die "of old age," a term with which we describe the fact that people die "simply" because they are old.⁵ While Gray's, Schneider's, and Macaulay's picture books are all focused on the relationship between the dying and their loved-ones, as well as on the main character's perception of his/her upcoming death, the processes of dying and therewith connected impairment of functions are presented accurately and serve as a realistic background for the reconsideration of death as a farewell from the beloved and the memories and good deeds that stay behind. The same cannot be said for Wild's *Old Pig*. A remarkable feature in *Old Pig* is "the fast forward" of Old Pig's disease and death. The story begins with
334 Old Pig in full health, glasses being the only sign of old age, until one morning she doesn't get up. Despite the suddenness, Old Pig and her granddaughter do not question what is going on, they don't call for a doctor and they don't communicate about the disease. They try to suppress all sad feelings and, as it is written on the back of the book, celebrate the world:

When she got home she tucked the rest of her money into Granddaughter's purse: "Keep it safe," she said, "and use it wisely." "I will," said Granddaughter. She tried to smile but her mouth wobbled, and Old Pig said, "There, there, no tears." "I promise," said Granddaughter, but it was the hardest promise she'd ever had to make. (Wild 1995, 15)

5 "The International Classification of Diseases does allow for old age—or, technically, senility without mention of psychosis—to be recorded [as the cause of death], but less than 1 percent of death certificates in the UK show this cause [...] Death from old age means, in effect, that a person's hold on life has become so precarious that, had it not been this particular cause of death today, it would have been another tomorrow." (Kirkwood 1999, 22)

Thus, a book discussing death, introduces suppression of sadness, of mentioning death, and of discussing illness.

3.2. Findings of the analysis

I propose that we can sense the denialism of ageing already at the level of an analysis of the general emplacement of the elderly in picture books. Older people are usually presented as main characters, but very rarely as a part of the child's context, as someone who just happens to be old. This can be interpreted as a reflection of how we perceive their position within society: the elderly are often perceived as outsiders, as a specific rather than an integral part of society. Such a perception of the elderly can be further observed as we analyze the presentation of the older people with a disease—here the majority of books is focused on age-related diseases. Although it is often the elderly that get ill, the authors, when possible, most often base their depiction of a disease on younger characters, which are, we propose, considered easier to identify with.

This is in accord with the point of view of age studies scholars, who stress that within our society, older people are commonly perceived as the others (Brand 2016; Stoller 2014; Gullette 2004; Woodward 1999; Beauvoir 1972). Gullette argues that age acts as a physically universal experience as well as a social category of otherness (2004). Elderly are legally equal to other grown-ups—they are responsible for their own actions, they can vote, participate in politics, etc.—, however, they are not treated as such. When they express feelings and wishes equal to that of younger people, such as lust, love, or jealousy, their behavior is considered absurd, comic, or even disgusting (Beauvoir 1972). Rubin argues that “the stereotype of the ‘sexless older years,’ [...] has placed its stamp upon our entire culture.” (1968) What the society expects of the elderly, is to act as springs of deeper wisdom, released of all carnal desires (Beauvoir 1972). These social expectations again resonate in the analyzed children's literature, where older people are often presented as those who possess special wisdom, an insight into the true nature of things, into the natural order.

335

The fact that the presentation of older people in picture books is closely connected to their role in society is further exemplified by the difference in the

presentation of the elderly in picture books published either in Slovenia or in the U.K.; as in Slovenian picture books the elderly are most often presented as surrogate parents, while in the U.K. picture books they are relieved of this duty and depicted as being similar to children. Such a presentation reflects the role of grandparents in Slovenia, where, until recently, the elderly after retirement very often took care of their grandchildren, while in the U.K. the daily-care for preschool children was either institutionalized or taken care of by stay-home or partly-working mothers, a phenomenon quite uncommon in the Slovenian environment (see, for example, Republika Slovenija – Statistični urad 2019).

As we presumed, denialism was further identifiable as we analyzed the presentation of biological ageing in the picture books. In our selection, fewer than 10 % include any presentation of elements of the biological ageing. Despite the far more established science of ageing as well as the culture of communication between scientists and the lay public in the U.K. in comparison to Slovenia, there is no significant difference between the two. The exact analysis of the reasons behind it exceeds the scope of this study. However, we suggest that it could be connected with the persistence of the denialism of ageing within both societies, which cannot be simply addressed by the specific media coverage of scientific work, but would have to be more generally addressed in the media to reach those not specifically interested in science and those most likely to escape into denialism.

Picture books most often present cultural and social attitudes towards ageing, older people, and death, but very rarely include any physiological descriptions of the process of ageing. Even, when authors choose to describe some biological aspects of ageing, for example, age-related diseases or illness as such, they often ignore or circumvent biological facts. For example, Laura Langston prefers to invent a symptom of dementia rather than look up an actually existing one. Furthermore, in *Recept za Ljubezen / A Recipe for Love* the main character's grandmother has apparently a very serious disease, which hinders her independence, however, it is described solely as a disease the name of which the child cannot remember. Similarly, the pigs in Wild's *Old Pig* have no intention to look for the cause, the name, or the cure for the sudden disease. Thus, a (grown-up) reader has the feeling that the old pig has a chronic disease, which, in accordance with the general character of the book, the pigs do not name or discuss; just as they do not discuss death or sadness.

It seems that when communicating with children we are generally prepared to discuss old age only as a time of peace, freedom, and wisdom, and present death more or less just metaphorically as a goodbye, as a dance with the stars. We are trying to avoid a discussion on the topics such as ageing and death with children, especially on the level when we have to face the unembellished reality, such as symptoms of age-related diseases or the process of dying. Opening doors to scientific perception of ageing often means opening doors to further questions that demand further consideration and do not allow an escape into denialism. Quality picture books such as Lindberg's *My Little Grandmother Often Forgets* or Macaulay's *Angelo* reveal the elephant in the living-room for what it is. Although social, cultural, and personal attitudes towards ageing present the main focus of these books, they successfully entangle them with scientifically accurate presentations of biological ageing, which is an important part of ageing, just as ageing, diseases, and death are important parts of our lives.

4. Opening a dialog on ageing with the help of selected book titles

337

The analysis of the selected picture books helped us identify some staggering aspects of the denialism of ageing—most importantly, the general emplacement of the elderly at the edge of society and the persistent ignorance of the biological aspects of ageing. However, it also helped us find some high-quality titles of children's literature that discuss life, death, and age in all their complexity. These were crucial as we aimed to develop materials for pedagogical praxis with a potential to open a dialog on ageing and offer an alternative to the denialism of ageing.

From 2016, we conducted three annual projects supported by the Slovenian National Committee for UNESCO: *Opening a Dialog on Ageing with Books* (2016), *With Books and Films to Science and Ethics* (2017) and *Tales of Age* (2018). The main parts of the projects were workshops, aimed at different age groups (from primary school children to the elderly). The workshops were based on the premise that quality literature can provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the ageing process (McGuire 2016) and has the ability to co-define our attitude towards the ageing and elderly

(Hollis-Sawyer and Cuevas 2013; Ansello 1997). They were focused on two aspects of ageing connected with the denialism of ageing, as identified within the analysis of picture books:

- the social perception of the elderly and the problematic emplacement of the elderly within the society; to address these, we have selected some quality book titles that depict active ageing and intergenerational relationships;

- the ignorance of the biological aspects of ageing; to address this, we have selected some quality book titles that depict physiological symptoms of ageing, age-related diseases, and the process of death.

The selection of book titles used at the workshops (in the Appendix 1 and also on: <https://tinabilban.wixsite.com/zgodbestaranja/izkusnje-iz-preteklih-let>) consisted of picture books, children's and Y.A. novels, and novels aimed at general public, in accordance to the specific reading tastes and abilities of the target public, as well as the goals of the workshops.⁶

338 It was our aim to open an interdisciplinary dialog on different aspects of ageing and thus to intertwine the discussion on literary depiction of ageing with personal experiences of the participants, scientific aspects of ageing, and philosophical/ethical reconsideration of some aspects of ageing.

4.1. Workshops with younger children (ages 8–10)

Workshops with younger children were based on quality picture books, which, with their combination of illustration and text and their small volume, enabled the reading of books at the workshops, in groups, combining critical reading with games such as children forming their own story with the help of illustrations before reading the text itself. Thus, it was possible for children

⁶ The selection of picture books was based on the results of the 2014 research, supplemented with some quality new titles. The children's and Y.A. novels were selected with the help of the Pionirska archive and its electronic search engine that enables searching for key words, age groups, and identifies recommended quality titles, and finally chosen on the basis of our expertise in the field of quality children's literature and performance of reading workshops. The selected novels aimed at general public were chosen on the basis of our personal expertise in the fields of contemporary literature as well as some recommendations of other experts, such as editors or reading groups' mentors.

to engage more with the books and their message. Furthermore, as children formed their own stories to accompany the illustrations, we were able to get some insight into their perception of ageing; for example, children presented with Blake's illustrations of *Mrs Armitage*, a very active character, who is surfing, cycling, rowing, probably all at once, interpreted the character as being middle-aged (despite the grey hair and wrinkles, which they interpreted as early symptoms of ageing) male (despite the long pony tail, which they interpreted as personal style of the curious character). Later, when reading the story, they were, however, surprised that the extremely active character in the story is actually an older lady.

On the second visit, we organized intergenerational workshops as we had asked the children to invite their grandparents or other older friends, relatives, neighbors, etc. We first encouraged them to read the selected picture books together, discuss the presented topics, and answer some questions on what they have just read. Later, we performed a quiz on biological ageing. The quiz on some basic knowledge from the field of biological ageing (with questions, such as "Who ages?," "Why do we live longer as people a hundred years ago?," "What are age-related diseases?," "How can we effect the ageing of our brains?") was actually a form of a lecture as every question-answer segment was followed by a short presentation of scientific data and their explanation. With the quiz, we engaged the children to listen more carefully and stimulated intergenerational collaboration, as children and their guests were taking parts in the quiz in mixed groups of children and the elderly. Furthermore, the quiz provided us with further insights into occurrence and forms of the denialism of ageing: when presented with the question "Do some cognitive functions, for example, memorizing, generally decrease with age?," some of the older guests quite actively advocated their opinion that they do not. They were unwilling to accept that their brains age as well as other parts of our body. Ageing of brain cells is connected with a specific stigma and we were faced with very strong denialism. For example, when presented with a MR-photo of the brains of an 80-year-old, compared with the photo of a 20-year-old, which clearly showed the effect of the brain cells' ageing and dying, the older participants of the quiz were willing to accept that some changes in cognitive functions show at the age of 80, but not at 60 or 70, which was generally their age. Such a reaction was in

accordance with our previous detection of the connection between the denialism of ageing and the ignorance regarding the biological aspects of ageing: biology of ageing confronts us with clear symptoms of ageing that do not allow much space for different interpretations, if we want to succeed with the denialism of ageing, the biological facts, or at least some of them, have to be ignored.

The quiz was also an excellent indicator of the role literature can have in providing children with a specific image of age and ageing. When answering the questions, children often based their answers on information provided by the picture books they have just read. The power of books was especially evident in the case of a short illustrated story *Človek ne spomni se / A Man Does Not Remember* (2011) by Katarina Kesič Dimić: a story focused on the relationship between a young girl and her grandmother who has dementia, starts with the grandmother's sudden illness, which is the reason that the grandmother has to move to a nursing home. However, later, when the girl visits the grandmother in the nursing home, the disease, which affects their relationship most, is dementia. Thus, the pupils, reading the book, made a conclusion that the disease the grandmother suddenly got and because of which she moved to the nursing home was dementia and it was almost impossible to persuade them that dementia progresses very gradually. The knowledge presented within the lecture could never have had the same effect as the knowledge incorporated into a story. When reading, children identify themselves with the characters from the book, they experience the events presented in books almost as vividly as through first-hand experiences. With the selected quality picture books we have provided children with experiences that exceeded the denialism of ageing (e.g., books discussing age symptoms, age-related diseases, etc.) and general social attitude towards the elderly (e.g., books that present intergenerational relationships, active ageing, and the elderly as an important integral part of the contemporary society).

4.2. Workshops with older children (ages 11–12)

For the workshops with older children, we prepared a list of quality children's and Y.A. novels of different genres and difficulties and let the children choose which title to read. During the two months, more or less all

the children participating in the project (approximately 50 children) read at least two books from the list. Against the mentors' expectations, otherwise reluctant readers did not only read the books, unconnected with the school curriculum, but were also willing to take an active part in the discussion about the books and topics they open. We propose that this success is connected with the possibility of, to some extent, free choice, which book to read, as well as with the interdisciplinarity of our approach: we were not solely interested in books and reading, but were constantly connecting the knowledge provided by books with children's personal experiences, scientific facts, ethical reconsiderations, etc., thus, we could address the children of different talents and interests to actively participate in all aspects of the workshops, using their interests as the entry point for the particular individual.

Workshops were structured similarly to the workshops for younger children with an additional introductory meeting when we offered the first bunch of books to children. With the selected books, such as Marjolijn Hof's *Pravila treh / The Rules of Three* (2015), we have managed to open a dialog on some taboo topics, crucial to our social every day, but rarely discussed, such as: whose is the decision about an old person's last days. The masterful depiction of topics, such as family struggle with the grand-grandfather's dementia or an old man's decision not to go to the nursing home but to meet his end in the mountains in accordance to his life-long philosophy, withdrew the social stigma from the topics otherwise considered, if nothing else, inappropriate for children. Children connected the stories with their own experiences, formed they own opinions and critically evaluated the actions of the characters as well as our social attitude towards these questions.

341

Again, the immense educational potential of quality books could be noticed during the quiz. For example, children reading novels presenting people with dementia (for example, Ivona Brezinová's *Bombonček za dedija Edija / Candy for Grandpa Edi*), were able to identify particular symptoms of the characters and connect them with a more general scientific description of dementia symptoms.

However, the comparison of the results of the quizzes conducted at the workshops with younger and older children, revealed better overall results of the younger children, especially when it came to the topics connected with the

denialism of ageing, such as the stigma connected with the age-related decrease of some cognitive functions. As similar results were provided within the school class 1, where numerous older guests joined the quiz, and the school class 2, with only one older guest, the choice of answers cannot be (solely) connected with the influence of the guests. We propose that social patterns influence the individual's perception and behavior in an age-dependent manner. On the one hand, older children are already under the influence of social prejudices and demands, thus they are constantly on the watch for the trick-questions, where the answers, which seem right, might prove to be socially unacceptable. On the other hand, younger children are more open to new knowledge, while their view is far less pre-defined with social prejudices and expectations.

4.3. Workshops with students of educational programs

342 The workshops with children provided us with an insight into the importance to open a dialog on ageing and offer an alternative to the denialism of ageing at an early age, when children are not yet burdened with social prejudices, expectations, and fears. Thus, we have decided to address the group of young people, who will have the most influence on our young in the future—namely, the students of the educational programs. We have organized lectures for future primary school teachers and workshops for future kindergarten teachers. As I am, in the present paper, interested in active engagement of the participants with books, I will hereby present only the latter.

We organized workshops for the students of the High School for Education and Gymnasium Ljubljana. The students were addressed in a twofold manner, as our primary target public and as future kindergarten teachers and thus mediators of the gained knowledge. Thus, we have provided them with two different selections of books:

1. With the selected quality novels and Y.A. novels in order to open a debate on their personal perception of ageing and age, ethical, social, and scientific aspects of ageing and age. The students actively engaged in the dialog, including discussion of some delicate and taboo topics, including social attitude towards the elderly as redundant or the right of the elderly to choose their final destiny. Again, the discussion, guided by different entry-points, from personal

experiences to literature interpretation, reconsideration of scientific facts, or ethical perspectives, enabled the young with different interests to actively participate. According to their mentor, we managed to engage some of the students, who otherwise very rarely participate in discussions connected with their school curriculum.

2. With the selected picture books aimed at kindergarten children in order to provide the future kindergarten teachers with some insights they could later use when working with children. The students were obliged to prepare a work plan for kindergarten activities connected with the selected picture books. Although the students were very open to the discussion of ageing, age, and death at the previous workshops, they had more restraints when preparing a discussion on these topics for younger children. While they were eager to discuss intergenerational relationships, active ageing, or even age-related diseases with younger children, they were less confident or even less prepared to discuss more disturbing parts of reality, such as the processes of dying and death, with them. Some of the books identified as problematic by the students were previously well accepted by the children—e.g., at workshops with younger children a year before or at some other reading events, including reading events for pre-school children, conducted either by the project-team members or their professional colleagues. The denialism of ageing is often connected with the reluctance to open a discussion of these topics with children. Burdened with the fear of ageing, people consider these topics too heavy, disturbing, or incomprehensible for children and are not prepared to delve further into the topic.

343

4.4. Workshops with the elderly

Within the second year of our projects, The University for the Third Part of Life expressed an interest for similar workshops to be organized for their students. Again, we opened a discussion with a selection of books: novels, as well as Y.A. novels and picture books, which enabled some insight into Y.A.'s and children's perspective of age, ageing, and intergenerational relationships. The participants, some of them reading picture books primarily to themselves, for the first time, appreciated these new insights, which encouraged a vibrant discussion on the complex perception of age, ageing, and death, co-defined by

specific attitudes of different generations. Connecting the content of the books with their own experiences, the participants became aware of these different age-related attitudes, including small children's unselective perception of life, before the formation of fear of ageing and death and escapism into denialism. Thus, we could appreciate the wide potential the children's and Y.A. literature has for the overcoming of the denialism of ageing, including the ability to change the perspective of the elderly.

5. Conclusion

344 We have proposed that due to specific nature of literature, it can enable us an insight into the life-world we meet in, while at the same time it has the ability to co-define the readers' life-world, influence their perception and action. Based on this proposition, we have employed literature to face the two main challenges connected with the overcoming of the denialism of ageing: first, to identify the denialism of ageing and the different forms it takes on, and, second, to project a pedagogical praxis that can successfully open a dialog on ageing and offer an alternative to denialism.

The analysis of the presentation of ageing and age in picture books provided us an insight into the scope and nature of the denialism of ageing. We have connected the lack of the elderly characters in supporting roles with the position of the elderly within our society: generally we do not perceive the elderly as an integral part of our society, but perceive them as the others (Brand 2016; Stoller 2014; Gullette 2004; Woodward 1999; Beauvoir 1972). The social divide between different generations, connected with the disintegration of extended families and the institutionalization of the elderly, supports the denialism of ageing, as it enables the young to keep the more obvious reminders of old age and its symptoms out of sight. Now, the younger lack a complex image of the old age. With the lack of understanding, the fear, the main reason behind the denialism of ageing, naturally grows. Furthermore, the analysis revealed the lack of depiction of and discussion on the biological aspects of ageing, including ignorance of biological facts when discussing topics that touch upon the biological aspects of ageing (Langston 2005), circumvention and suppression of the questions connected with the biological aspects of ageing (Wild 1995; Podgoršek 2012).

We propose that this is closely connected to the denialism of ageing as the physiological symptoms of ageing are the hardest to deny and they face us with unembellished reality as they present life in all of its complexity.

These insights were crucial as we prepared the workshops for different target groups, the aim of which was to open a dialog on ageing with the selected high-quality literature titles. The selected titles as well as the organization of work were prepared in accordance with the two topics essentially connected with the denialism of ageing as identified by the previous analysis: first, the problematic emplacement of the elderly within the society and therewith connected need to establish firm intergenerational relationships, and, second, the ignorance of the biological aspects of ageing. The workshops met our main objectives: after reading the books, the participants were prepared to share their own experiences and opinions, including comprehensive opinions on otherwise tabooed topics. Knowledge provided by books was later connected with some further scientific facts about ageing and/or philosophical discussion about some aspects of ageing: from the discussion on what ageing actually is and/or what it means to us, how we experience ageing, and how our experience of ageing changes, to the question whose decision is it how to spend the late years and/or how to prepare for, or how to meet death.

345

Furthermore, the workshops allowed us to get some further insight into the forms of the denialism of ageing, for example, the extremely strong denialism of the ageing of the brain and therewith connected impairment of cognitive functions. Our approach was more successful in the case of younger children, who are, I conclude, not yet burdened with social expectations, fears, and prejudices—they were prepared to openly discuss different aspects of ageing, were genuinely interested in the topic, and very open to the new information, especially information provided in the form of a story. The workshops also provided us with an insight into the immense potential of children's and Y.A. literature when we are to open a dialog on ageing with the elderly: quality children's and Y.A. literature presents the reader with the child's or Y.A.'s perspective, it connects the older reader with his/her younger self and through that with younger generations. This is a good starting point for the overcoming of the denialism of ageing as it can present the elderly an alternative primary understanding of age and death, not yet burdened

with fear and therewith connected denialism. Furthermore, it is an excellent starting point for an intergenerational dialog and therewith connected gerontological ethics.

As I have stressed in the “Introduction,” ageing is one of the most important phenomena in contemporary society. It defines who we are, how we perceive the world and the others:

aging is a function of personal life, and that personal life is social all the way down: experience is qualitatively different as we age and as we build a past; age is intrinsic to personal identity; finally our sense of age is formed in relation to others and in our dependency on others. (Bavidge 2016, 222–223)

346 As more and more people live long enough to await the old age, today we also speak about the phenomenon of the aged society. The phenomenon of ageing thus importantly affects our perception of society and projection of the future society we would like to live in; constructive intergenerational dialog is necessary if we want to project a successful and inclusive future society. As Søren Holm argues in his essay “What do the Old Owe to the Young?,” “the old do have a set of both formal and substantive obligations towards the young” (2016, 398), from equal respect and equal rights, to fairness in equal societal participation, fair distribution of resources and fair assessment of claims, to the benefit of their friendship and knowledge (399). Here, we could recall Eugen Fink’s view on education. Fink primarily understands education as an inter-generational relationship. For him education is to be found “wherever a difference between the generations exist, where those who are older feel responsible for the younger” (Fink 1959). However, as Holm concludes:

It is important to see that all of these obligations can, and should be reciprocated by the young. The young, for instance, owe the old equal respect and equal rights, and they owe them to respond appropriately to offers of friendship. (2016, 399)

The inter-generational dialog has to be based on experience of oneself and the others, as Silvia Stoller argues in “We in the Other, and the Child in Us” (2014), where she outlines a gerontological ethics based on phenomenological reconsideration of age and time in Beauvoir (1972) and Merleau-Ponty (1962). In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir appeals to the reader to recognize oneself in one’s older other and thus to identify with the elderly as our future-selves. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty appeals to the reader to remain in contact with our younger self. Silvia Stoller connects their lines of thought. The young should identify with the elderly as their future-self, while the elderly should identify themselves with the young as their past-self (2014). The understanding of ageing, of the aged people, and of the aged society is based on grasping the experience of ageing and of understanding of ourselves (as those who live in time and are thus *a priori* set in a dialog with ageing): “our lives are ageing lives” (Bavidge 2016, 211).

Philosophy can offer a phenomenology of aging: it could describe the structures of the experience of aging. Or, to avoid the assumption that experience is something subjective going on inside our heads, we might say philosophy could describe the structures of the ways in which the world becomes available to us as we age. (Bavidge 2016, 208)

347

However, the thematization of ageing is not possible, if we are unwilling to discuss ageing, if we deny ageing and its symptoms. The inter-generational dialog is not possible, if we consider ageing as a topic inappropriate for younger generations, as the subject that only concerns the old.

Here, we propose, lies the potential of quality literature, which can help us open a dialog on ageing and can help us identify ourselves with the other, to become aware of their position within the society and their perspective of the world. While the analysis of literature and the workshops based on the selected literary works that thematize ageing, the main part of our research, do not directly follow philosophical methodology, they are based on a philosophical position—on our need to thematize the phenomena of ageing, our experience of ageing, etc.—, and open the path for a philosophical discussion on ageing, our fear of ageing, and the denialism of this fear.

We believe that within the workshops we have constituted a pedagogical praxis that can be successful in overcoming the denialism of ageing. However, we are highly aware that if we were to observe long-term changes in the attitude towards ageing, it would be necessary to perform such workshops more regularly, for example, to include them in the school curriculum.⁷ Furthermore, it is a praxis that should support, and be at the same time enriched by, a philosophical reconsideration of ageing, with a comprehensive thematization of the subjective and inter-subjective experiences of ageing and age.

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⁷ Our attempt towards this goal was actualized in the didactic manual *Knjige na temo staranja in starosti / Books on the Topic of Ageing and Age* (Bilban and Jamnik 2018), where we gathered some quality literature titles used at the workshops together with our experiences, expert knowledge, and recommendations on how to work with these books as we open a dialog on ageing with different target publics. It was our aim that the manual, primarily intended for teachers, librarians, and reading mentors, would lead to such a long-term project and would provide us with further insights into the prospects of the presented pedagogical praxis.

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Appendix 1 | Dodatek 1

Literature used at the workshops

- Picture books:

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353

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- Novels:

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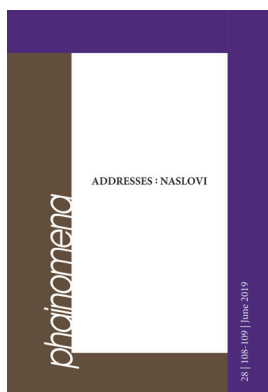
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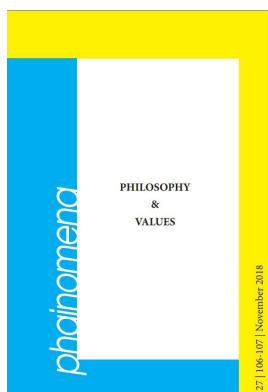
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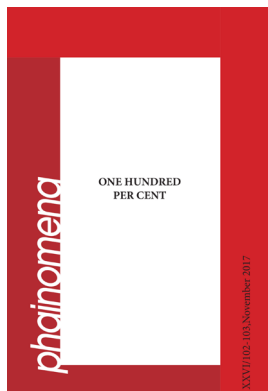
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