



# Silence a Matter of Public Concern

Reconsidering Critical Environmental and Sustainability Education

Danny Wildemeersch

Laboratory for Education and Society

Research Community 'Public Pedagogy and Sustainable Challenges' – 24/3/2017



Wildemeersch, D. (2017). Silence – A matter of Public Concern: Reconsidering Critical Environmental and Sustainability Education. *Environmental Education Research*.  
Published online: DOI: 10.1080/13504622.2017.1301385

# Content

- Welcome to Flanders
- Waerbeke – silence, serenity and space
- The commodification of silence
- The '(re-)discovery of the commons'
- Critical environment and sustainability education
- Diverse views on critical pedagogy: Freire, Rancière, Arendt, Masschelein, Biesta
- Taking your time in times of urgency
- Waerbeke's inspiration
- Conclusion: critical environmental and sustainability education



Foto: Raf Wildemeersch



## De Vlaamse verrommeling The chaotic Flemish environment

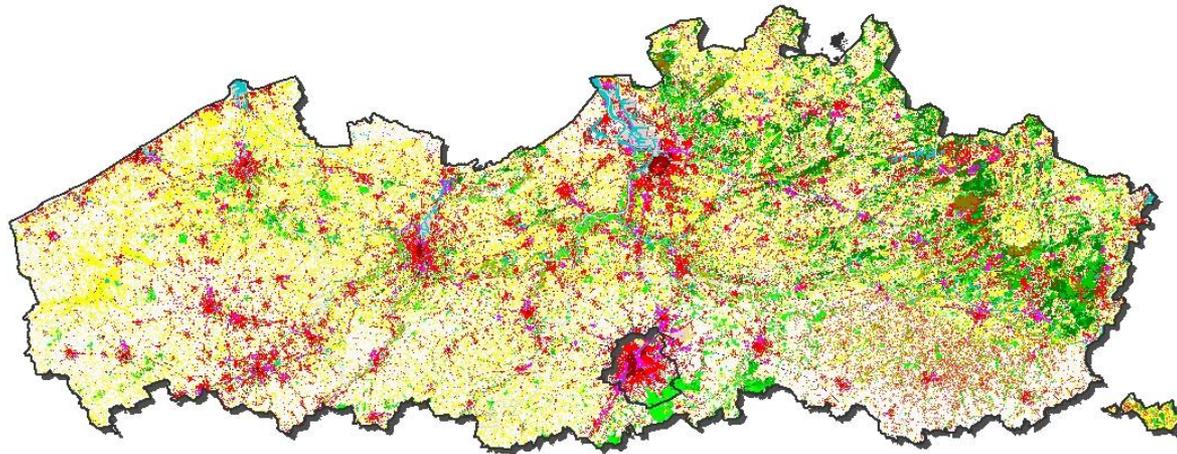
Bron: [www.deanderekrispeeters.wordpress.com](http://www.deanderekrispeeters.wordpress.com)

# Welcome to Flanders

Flanders is a very densely populated region with little open space left, where the sounds and noises of hyperactive modern life penetrate even its most remote corners. The entire Flemish territory is often described by urban planners and geographers as a diffuse, dispersed city. The distinction between urban and rural areas has become blurred since the rapid economic and demographic changes in the fifties and the sixties. The result of this is the dissemination of the urban features through the entire region, with city fragments all over the territory, a problematic condition of sustainability, a wasteful soil use, a disfeatured nature, a chaotic urban planning and an unattractive environment (Boudry et al, 2003, p. 27-28).

# The dispersed city

Bodemgebruiksbestand, opname 2001



**Legende**

-  Provincie
-  Vlaams gewest

1 : 900.000



Agentschap voor Geografische Informatie Vlaanderen  
23/06/2010

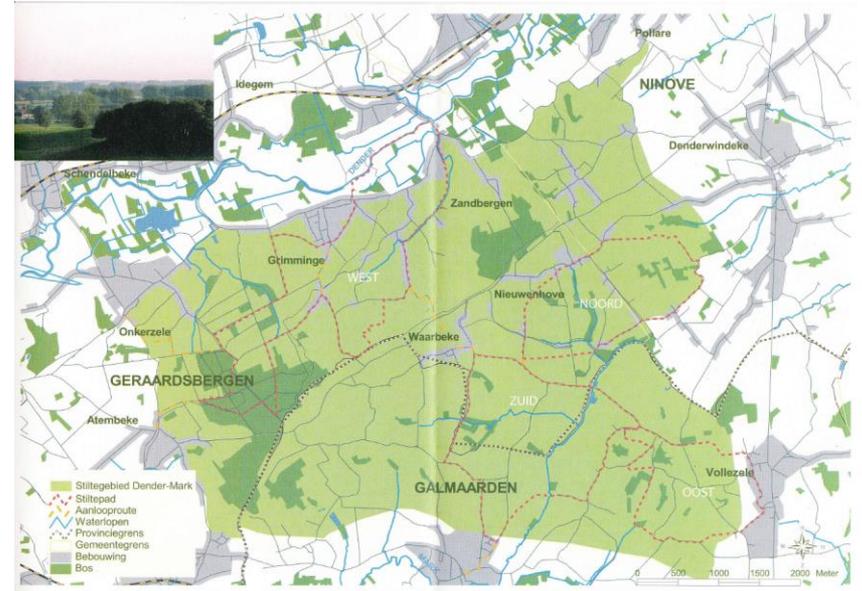
[W]

WAERBEKE  
*stille werkt*



# A socio-cultural movement

- Waerbeke: a movement promoting silence and quality of life since 2001
- Waarbeke: situated in Flemish rural area
- Silent territory Dender-Mark: 28km<sup>2</sup> chosen for its quality of life features
- Creation of new silent territories and connections
- Conferences, publications, networks, exhibitions



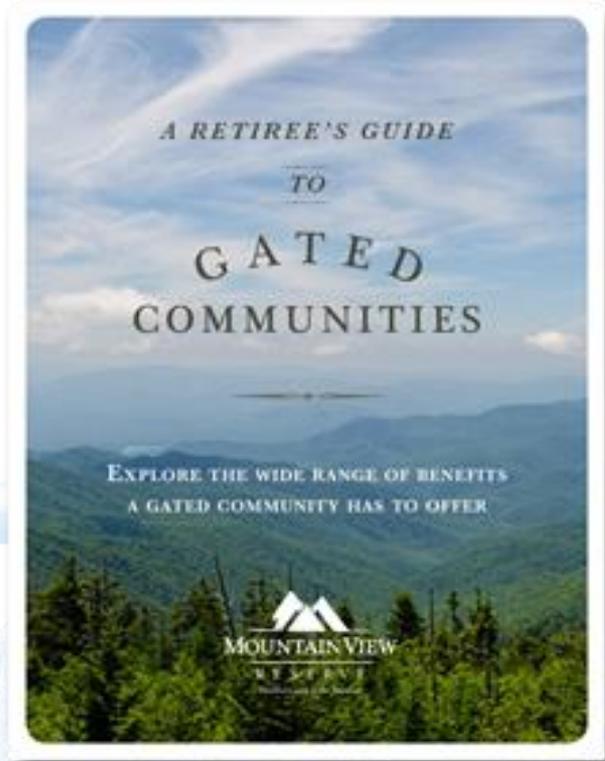
# A rhizomatic approach

‘In recent years, in many places in Flanders and Brussels – transgressing different policy domains – civil initiatives emerge, engaging in matters of silence, serenity and space. The activities spring from a broad undercurrent of experiences, perspectives and theoretical reflection that, as a rhizome, time and again obtains new forms and dimensions. The *rhizome* is - for *Waerbeke* - an adequate metaphor to designate the growing need for and attention to silence, serenity and space that emerges at various places and among different persons in all sorts of dimensions.’  
(Waerbeke, 2015, translation DW).

# A Pedagogy of Silence

- Connect to existing networks: ecological, educational, health care, youth care, ..
- Create open spaces of conversation in connection with public matters of concern.
- Create opportunities for participants to express their own link with silence, serenity and space.
- Emancipatory: depart from the existing qualities, not the deficits or the problems (Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler – Joseph Beuys).
- Explore opportunities for action (in the sense of individual and collective change)

# Silence is not a commodity



# 'Enclosure of the Commons'



# The enclosure of the commons

‘It’s a process by which corporations pluck valuable resources from their natural contexts, often with government support and sanction, and declare that they be valued through market prices. The point is to convert resources that are shared and used by many ones that are privately owned and controlled, and treat them as tradeable commodities’.

Bollier, 2014, p. 37

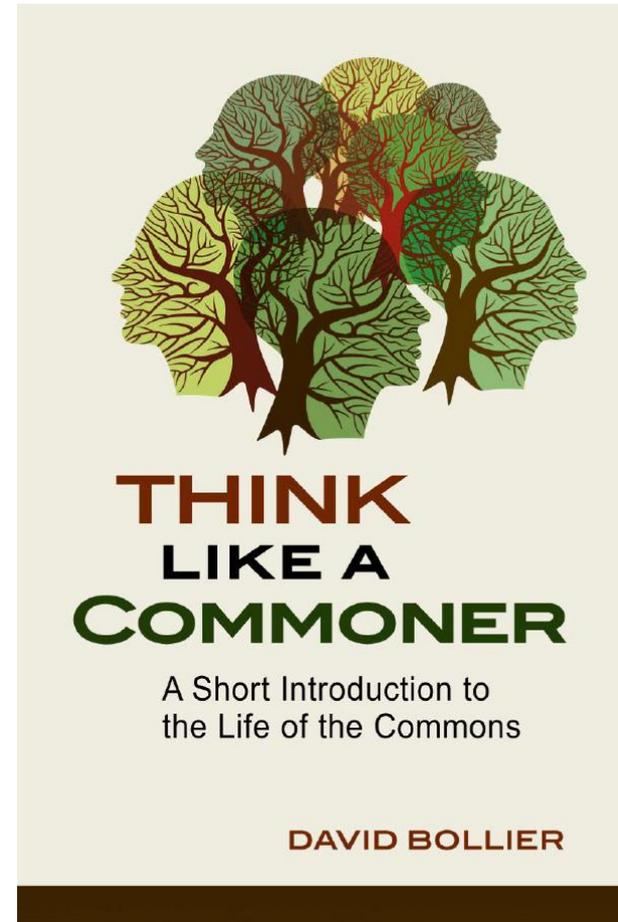
# Silent theft



- Nature: privatisation of land, water, local food production, genetic codes.
- Public spaces: parks, highways, bridges, tunnels, telecommunication
- Knowledge and culture: folklore, the marketization of academic knowledge.

# The (re)discovery of the commons

‘Goods and practices  
‘that we inherit from  
nature and civil  
society, which we are  
duty-bound to pass  
along, undiminished,  
to future generations’  
(Bollier, 2007, p. 11)



# Commons =

## A resource + a community + a set of protocols

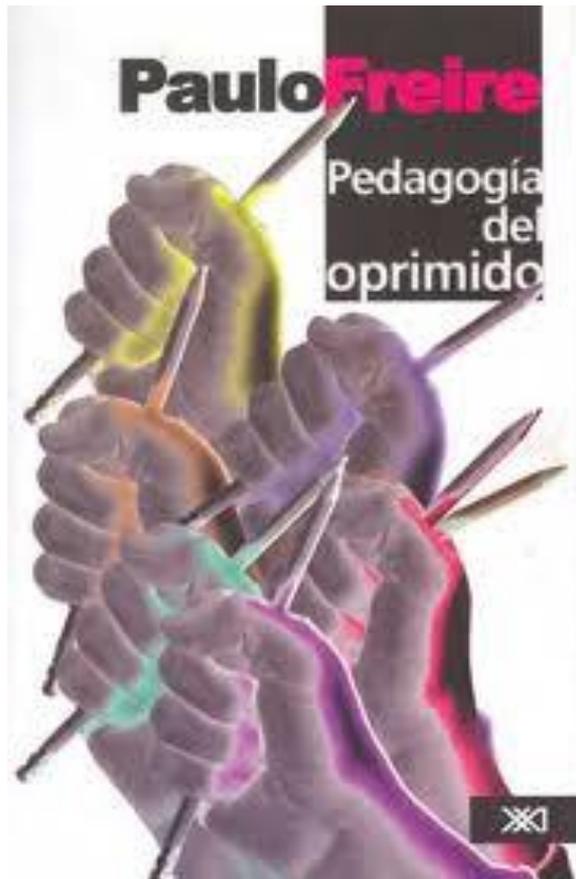
- A community decides to manage a *resource* as a common good.
- Such commitment includes *a narrative* about the value of that particular resource
- But also *principles and practices* to install the resource and to manage it.
- Waerbeke discovers the quality of silence as an important resource in present-day society
- It gradually develops a story about the importance of silence, serenity and space
- Together with citizens and policy makers, principles for 'silent territories' are developed

Bollier, 2014, p. 15

# Silence is a matter of public concern

- The burden of flexible adaptation to the continuous stream of demands, expectations, changes and challenges today is increasingly put on the shoulders of individuals.
- Enjoying wellness is one particular way of dealing with that burden.
- Another way is the engagement with the collective, social responsibility for the recovery and the sustaining of the commons.
- Therefore, critical reflection is needed. But what does critical reflection mean today?

# Time for critical reflection

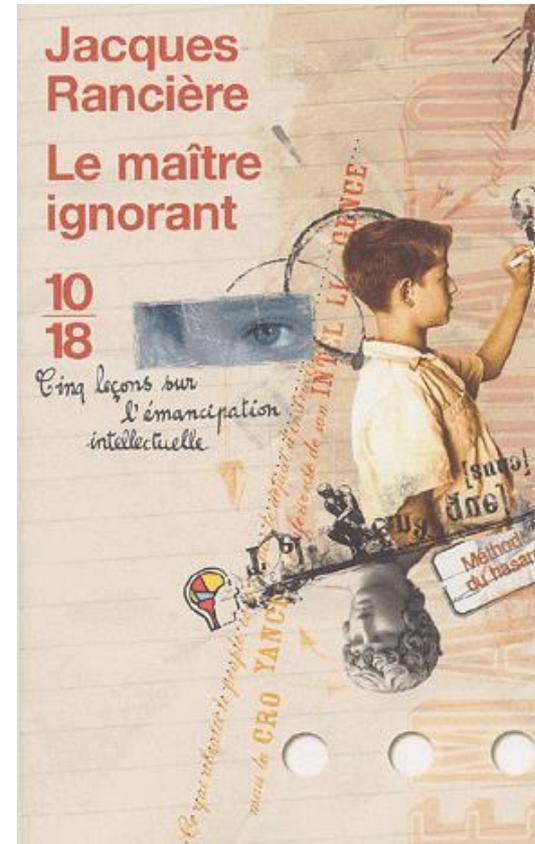
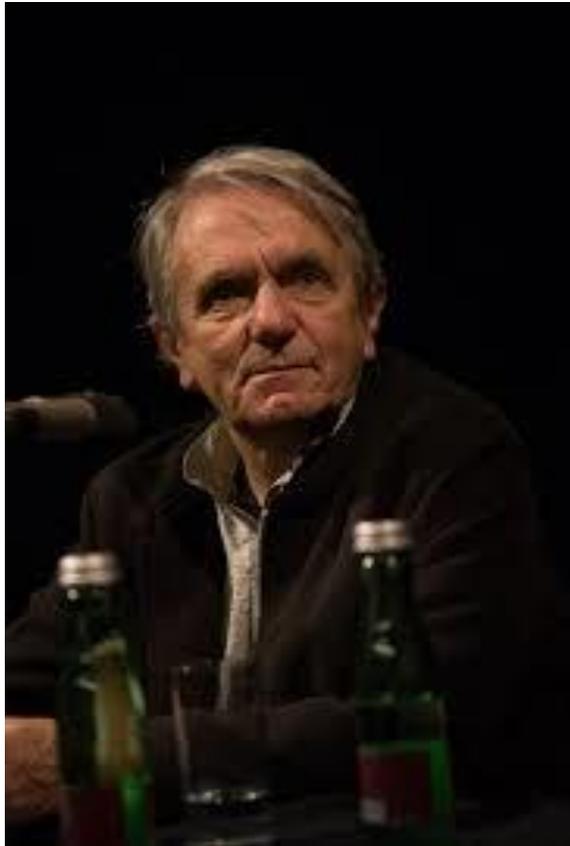


- Banking concept
- Oppression
- Cultural invasion
- Liberation
- Cultural action
- Conscientizaçao
- Awareness raising
- Dialogue
- Equality/equity

# Limit experiences of critical pedagogy

- Uncertainty about the 'definite' correct answers regarding complex societal issues (wicked problems).
- Unpredictability of the 'empowering' outcomes of critical education
- The limits of 'true' knowledge.
- Dependency relationships are continually reproduced, in spite of the good intentions

# Jacques Rancière



# Unorthodox ideas

- Rancière criticizes the tendency of intellectuals to present themselves as ‘enlightened spirits’: their truth is ‘the’ truth.
- Educational, cultural and political practices: ‘others’ are in need of awareness raising by the master explicator.
- Thereby, the capacity to think for oneself, without the help of an enlightened spirit, is neglected.
- In this way, people are time and again brought into a condition of dependency and even stultified.

# Intellectual emancipation

- **Assumption**

The emancipation of the learner is not the outcome of the educational process; it is an assumption at the beginning of the process, that needs to be verified

- **Equality of intelligence**

All humans dispose of an intelligence that translates signs into other signs and proceeds by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavouring to communicate to it

- **Educational practice**

Suspend your prejudice and challenge the learner to communicate what s(h)e sees, feels and thinks in response to what is being presented (a will-to-will relationship)

# The poetic labour of translation



In this concrete situation of insecurity, this schoolmaster ‘does not teach his pupils *his* knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified’. (Rancière, 2009b)

# Plurality according to Hannah Arendt



“For if to act means to take initiative, to introduce the unexpected into the world, it also means that it is not something that can be done in isolation from others, that is independent of the presence of a plurality of actors who, from their different perspectives, can judge the quality of what is being enacted’ (ibid. p. 319).

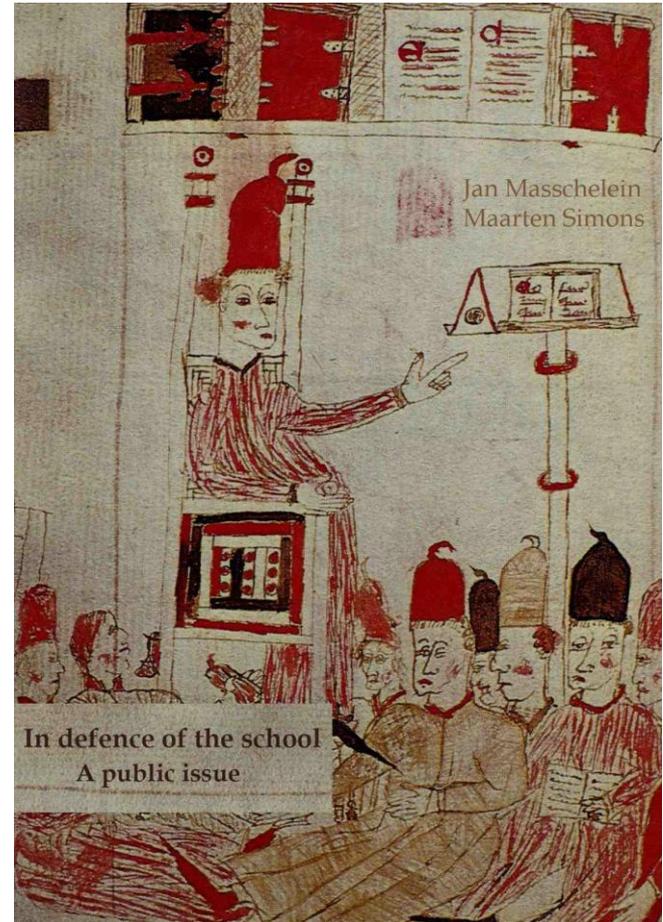
# Power and Solidarity According to Arendt

- In Arendt's view emancipation is never a solitary activity
- Solidarity with others is necessary to obtain power vis-à-vis those who obstruct the new beginning. Solidarity is not 'compassion'.
- Solidarity is based on power, that is, the creation of a community of interest with the oppressed and the exploited.
- "The originality of Arendt's philosophical legacy lies in her insistence that power resides not in the individual capacity of the individual agent, but in the potential capacity of plural agents to deliberate and act together" (Nixon, 2001)

# Education is 'suspension'

Education is 'suspension of the ordinary time'. 'When suspension occurs, tasks and spaces such as the family, the workplace, the sports club, the pub and the hospital no longer apply. (..). Suspension as we understand it here means (temporarily) rendering something inoperative, or in other words, taking it out of production, releasing it, lifting it from its normal context. It is an act of de-privatisation, that is, de-appropriation'.

Jan Masschelein & Maarten Simons, p. 32-33



# The educational way

‘Yet we live in impatient times (..). The call to make education strong, secure, predictable and risk-free is an expression of this impatience. (..) The educational way, the slow, difficult, frustrating and weak way, may therefore not be the most popular in an impatient society. But in the long run it may well turn out to be the only *sustainable* way, since we all know that systems aimed at the total control of what human beings do and think eventually collapse under their own weight, if they have not already been cracked open from the inside before’.

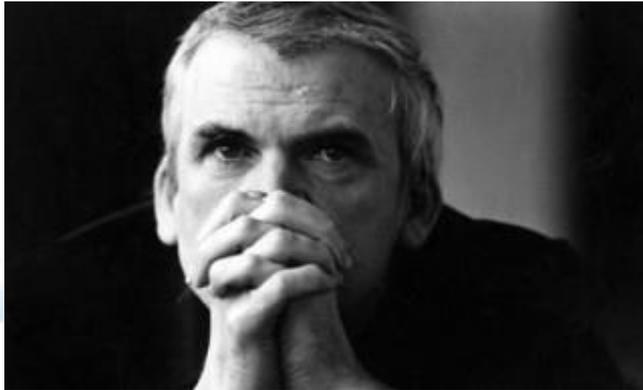
Gert Biesta, 2014, p. 3-4

# Urgent environmental challenges



- Climate change
- Pollution
- Loss of biodiversity
- Water shortage
- Deforestation
- Water erosion

# Critical thinking needs time



‘There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. The degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting’

Milan Kundera in: *Slowness*

# Taking your time in times of urgency



‘Il faut aller très  
lentement,  
parce que le défi  
est très urgent’

Bruno Latour

# Revisiting Critical Pedagogy

	Freire	Rancière	Arendt	M/S/B
Features	Equality (social, economical, political) as outcome of liberation	The assumption of emancipation (equality) to be verified in practice	In spite of the 'social inequality', there can be 'political equality'	Equality/ Freedom in line with Rancière
	Critique of banking concept	Critique of master explicator	Freedom, Plurality, Acting together	Critique of the instrumentalization of education
	Dialogical relationship	Will-to-will relationship	Action and speech as disclosure of unique persons	Suspension/ Interruption/ time/Separate spaces
	Action/ Reflection	Reflection/ Subjectivation	To act in concert (power)	From private troubles to public concerns
Critique/questions	'False consciousness' a problematic concept	Emancipation: an individual process	The 'tricky' notion of 'collective identity' – the 'we'	What about solidarity and collective emancipation?

# Waerbeke's Inspiration

- Acting together: Waerbeke creates spaces for speech and action, where people can individually and collectively relate to the theme of 'silence, serenity and space'.
- Waerbeke creates moments of interruption/suspension: they introduce a stutter, a hesitation.
- Participants can make evident and surprising connections between arts, meditation, politics, environmental action, public health, experiences of trauma and care, etc..
- Waerbeke invites participants to set up 'communities of practice'
- In doing so, they create public spaces where people can move away from fixed securities and explore 'new beginnings'
- It are democratic experiments where private troubles are transformed into matters of public concern

## In conclusion

Critical environmental and sustainability education creates public spaces for individual and social transformation, where participants speak and are spoken to, on an equality basis and with respect for their uniqueness, about their concerns for the commons. It is a democratic practice with an open end that carefully navigates between the necessity of urgent solutions and the need for moments of interruption or suspension. Or in the words of Waerbeke: the need for moments of silence, serenity and space

# Sources

- Biesta, G. (2014). *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Boulder: Paradigh
- Bollier, David (2007). Bollier, David. 2007. “A new politics of the commons.” *Renewal* 15(4): 10-16.
- Bollier, David (2014). *Think Like a Commoner. A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*. Gabriola Island (Ca): New Society Publishers.
- Burke, Leo (2010). A Common Matter, *Kosmos – Journal for Global Transformation, Fall-Winter*.
- Dale, Roger & Robertson, Susan (2004). Interview with Boaventura de Sousa Santos. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 2(2), 147-160.
- De Schutter, D. & Peeters, R. (2015). *Hannah Arendt. Politiek Denker*. Klement: Zoetermeer.
- Masschelein, J. & Simons, M. (2013). *In Defence of the School*. Leuven: Education, Culture and Society Publishers.
- Nixon, J. (2001). Imagining ourselves into being: conversing with Hannah Arendt, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 9(2), 221-236, DOI: 10.1080/14681360100200116
- Rancière, J. (2006). *De onwetende meester. Vijf lessen over intellectuele emancipatie*. Leuven: Acco
- Van Poeck, K. and Vandenabeele, J. (2012). Learning from sustainable development: education in the light of public issues. *Environmental Education Research*, 18(4): 541-552.
- Waerbeke (2015). *Strategisch beleidsplan 2016-2020*.