

## ***On Love, Objects, and Objectifications: Children in a Material World***

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This work first appeared as a 15-page paper for a doctoral seminar in education at McGill University, Montreal in October 2002. Claudia Mitchell, our professor, challenged us to reflect on the phenomenology of children's space. My paper for that course focused on my child's room. I have since incorporated contrastive and reflective elements from my anthropological observations on childhood and edited the form and the content of the first version to present at the *CHILDHOODS 2005* conference in July in Oslo.

## ***Prologue: on Love***

How to love a child, asked Janush Korchak, the Polish pediatrician and pedagogue at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which perhaps meant how to be Human. Yet, most people find it difficult to conceive what it is to be able to listen to a child, to respect a child, and to be there for a child even when not one's own, even when one feels it is beyond one's power. The love in your heart will give you the strength, was Korchak's message. Day or night, he waited by the bedside of a dying child so that when the child's eyes opened they would meet the doctor's and the child would know that s/he was not alone in this world and then death would seem less cold, less frightful, less solitary. During World War II, the Germans condemned to death the group of some 200 Orphans in his charge. The doctor had a chance to stay behind. He said that he would not abandon his children at this difficult moment of their lives. He went with them. They all vanished one foggy dawn.

From the biographical note to the Russian edition of  
*How to Love a Child*.

Despite the widespread illusion of human "progress", the pertinence of this question has not diminished: What does it mean to love? And, more specifically, how can we be sure that we do love our children?

### ***on Things: questions of Cost***

I often hear parents use the term "love" to justify their absence from their children's lives replacing themselves with bought objects: 'I love you, look what I got you'. Or: "stop being ungrateful, dad and I work so hard because we love you; we've got to work in order to earn money for your own good", the logic being:

1. work is what brings money. Parents' care for their children is not paid and therefore is not work. A stranger who cares for a child is paid and therefore is considered to work, even though child-care in general is a minimum wage profession – when lucky.

2. we work so hard in order to earn money with which we can buy you things and other parent-substitutes, such as formula, pacifiers, toys, baby-sitters, educators, friends, books, toys, clothes, more toys, ad infinitum.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu included in the term "possessions" the non-material or social and symbolic capital, such as education, taste, knowledge, etc. Material and non-material possessions acquire their value through a social understanding and negotiation. Value is not an inherent aspect of objects, effort or time. It is the result of a complex process that involves mythology, education, and the mobilization of the whole cultural apparatus in order to impose an idea which in the capitalist/globalist world means that some individuals and groups earn more for their time and effort while others incomparably less or that some things cost less while others incomprehensibly more. For example, one could make a t-shirt from scrap, recycled tissue, wear it merrily and it would cost one hour worth of effort. If the maker belongs to an upper class with social and economic weight and labels himself or herself as an "haute couture" and not low couture designer, one could exchange (i.e. sell) this scrap t-shirt for thousands of dollars. How does this work? Bourdieu explains that by belonging to a certain group with social and economic power one sells not only the t-shirt but also the label that marks the buyer as a member of that group. Hence, taste and the act of buying become tickets to participation in a specific clique and as such labels differentiate their owner from owners of other labels. Needless to say, that currency ratings undergo similar "operations" in order to blow-up the rate of some and deflate to the point of total misery and extinction the currency of others.

Of course this works because people believe in this system or resign to it because they either view it as natural or as inevitable. If people didn't participate in it, needless to say, it wouldn't be there. But since most people strive to acquire material and symbolic wealth, they succumb to spending more on overpriced labels, currencies, objects, services, etc. As Bourdieu demonstrates, they forget that the stakes in a pyramidal order are predetermined so that the majority will stay at the bottom of the scale regardless of how much they work, purchase or spend. There is simply no space for everyone up there. But the myths are important to give people the hope and the illusion

that if they worked hard, studied more, bought and consumed, each one of them can end up there.

### ***on Things: the question of Love, Hatred, and Shame***

The culture of childhood, parenthood, or that of child-rearing and education is vital for the endurance of a system, particularly for those who profit from it. What puzzles though is when people who have more to sacrifice than to reap from this system of exchange abandon their children to it and to the professionals trained to safeguard someone else's interests. Parents justify this act by saying that "we are absent all day from your lives in order to buy you things, care, company, and love".

Love, in this sense, includes everything from the hard-core matter to the effervescent idealism that includes taste, types of knowledge, and social networks. Love in the other sense, where a person gives something of the self to another, has no place in the culture of baby-sitters, day-care, school, extensions, etc. In fact, the majority of parents secretly (even from themselves) hate themselves and feel that they have nothing to transmit and hence send their children to the professionals who transmit to children professional "love" during the 8 am – 6 pm shifts and based on the Ministry of Education curriculum - a programme set not with love and out of love, but from the perspective of how to most efficiently organize labour and consumption patterns. Education offers tools, not love and since the majority has to stay at the bottom to carry the pyramid on their shoulders, the standardized syllabus is the most efficient way to achieve subordination, as long as parents don't meddle in.

Love, effort, gender issues have all become useful concerns in contemporary sociology – a normative science, like psychology. Some American feminists have even attempted to calculate the value of love in order to create an equation of male and female unaccounted for contribution or effort at home and in society - not a bad idea in itself when seen from this logic of experience but highly problematic because it perpetuates that same logic where parenthood is understood as the provision of social and material capital before and at the expense of other aspects of children's and

family well-being, leading to a crisis of childhood, parenthood and family.

This crisis is the result of the pricing system discussed above, since the time and effort spent by a parent on a child is not valued and childcare in general is a low pay occupation. What happens is that the majority of people in general and in the sphere of childcare in particular work harder and dirtier yet fare poorer and have little time and things to offer to children.

If the poor workers bestow little time, social capital, and precious matter upon their progeny, those who fare better compensate the lost time at work with acquisitions. In this logic, things become directly proportionate to “love” and raise many questions, such as what type of people and the degree of their health can such a culture nurture.

The topic of poverty is key here, but unfortunately, I have limited space and time to give it its due. In this work, I shall concentrate on material culture as a context for relationships because access to material goods is an important part of how people view themselves and their relationships with others. Here are two examples to illustrate this self-perception.

“I grew up extremely poor,” I heard on several occasions in Canada and the U.S. Such proclamation startled me. What is it like to characterize oneself as poor? Myself, I grew up in a household with financial strains - at times dire - but I never perceived myself or my family as “poor”. Rather the opposite. Growing up, I felt happy. I asked what it meant to grow up poor in North America. My poor interlocutors replied that they couldn’t buy new clothes.

“It was horrible. I hated going to school, ‘cause others had fancy new clothes while mine always came from the thrift shop. And then for X-mass, everyone had those big X-mass trees with lots of new decorations and boxes and boxes of gifts, but we always had this same old plastic one with the same old stuff and little second-hand-shop gifts. I hated my mother. I hated my home. I was always so ashamed of them. Brrr... I couldn’t wait to grow up and get away from them [parents]...” explained Lynne, a graduate of Smith College who grew up in California.

Suzan, an artist, from Ontario also focused on clothes.

I grew up extremely poor. I never had new clothes. They were always hand-downs. My mother decided to have my sister and I even though she was single and my father never intended to marry her. But she

couldn't handle the responsibility. So when we got the welfare cheque, we felt like millionaires. That's how poor we've been.... I always attended private schools, 'cause I had scholarships. All those other kids had rich parents and nice things and I was always wearing hand-down pants. Sometimes 5<sup>th</sup> generation. I hated it.

Both of these examples are characteristic of the majority of other comments I heard on growing up poor in the context of "developed" countries. Much of the perception of poverty is related to wanting new things, more things, better things, like-other-people's things, better-than-other-people's things. In other words, the pressure to fit into outside material standard shifts the dimensions of inside relations and togetherness to splintered childhoods, shattered by objects, the lack of them, and the desire to possess.

Suzan's comment is more interesting than most others, because it reveals the extent of poverty her family was subjected to apart from having had to wear hand-down clothes; for, if they lived on less than welfare for several years, it means that they had no provision in terms of basic necessities and in Western countries - where access to nature and public space needs income - it means that they were also deprived of space along with time. What struck me in Suzan, as well as in other reflections, is that their perception of poverty concentrated on the lack of new clothes. They never expressed to me compassion or love towards their struggling parents and siblings, only hatred and shame. Suzan also judged her mother as irresponsible, because it is widely assumed in this globalizing culture that parenthood is to be deserved and earned according to the scale of income. The moral and the material thus intertwine.

"I'm against prolonged maternity leave," said Agnes, a chemist from Montreal. "Each time I had a kid, I went back to the laboratory when they were 3 months old. If you don't have enough money to pay for your staying at home, then you have to work. If you can't work, then don't have kids. It's as simple as that". Agnes had 2 children and said that she couldn't afford any more".

These examples indicate that in North America, even Canada - who does have a more extended parental leave and welfare and which prides itself as being compassionate - the notion of having children is tightly connected with income. Income, children and the standard of living are conceptualized as natural categories that are the result and reflection of what a person deserves: if one has much money, one deserves it. If one is in financial strain, one merited it too.

Love and compassion are read in the context and from a life-stance of capitalism and consumerism.

Moreover, these examples reveal that the pressure to possess - not make - things is a major force underlying the feeling of deprivation and poverty, since most parents in consumer societies see their parenthood as providing social and material capital before all and at the expense of other aspects of children's and family well-being forgetting the context of pain and exploitation that is inherent to capitalist production and market economy. It is important to remember though that when parents choose to replace themselves with toys, books, live-in-care, nannies, genetically modified food, etc. they replace themselves with objects imbued with immense suffering. The content of capitalist production is based on the exploitation of living creatures and plants. A nanny living with and caring for a wealthy child in North America or Europe abandons behind 5 children in the Philippines so she could send her hungry in all the senses children the miserable pennies bestowed on her by the wealthy Northerners. The genetically modified grains, fruits and vegetables carry sterile seeds that are incapable of the basic instinct of life: self-reproduction. The sterilization of pets, the poisonous pesticides and fungicides, the dying from exhaustion and malnutrition third-world workers, the stressed-to-the-point-of-madness first- and second-world employees, the animals tortured in farms and in medical and scientific laboratories, and so forth, all engender objects of hatred, suffering and death. This context is an essential part of the relationship between objects and people.

Children abandoned to these objects inhale this hatred and suffering. Abandoned to the claws of ministerial curriculum they also learn to perceive themselves as poor. Conceiving themselves as poor, they become impotent, lusting to amass and to consume and when they cannot satisfy this urge, instead of questioning the system that betrayed them, they internalize their place in it and learn to hate themselves and their parents - the cradle of their lives. Hatred seems to be the central lesson of the curriculum that leads to devout consumerism and hence to a crisis of childhood, parenthood and family.

## ***on Things: the question of categorization and interests***

The symptoms of this crisis are manifest in the abundance of statistics on neurological and mental disorders that either indicate self-hatred and the desire to change oneself, such as anorexia, bulimia and the statistics on plastic surgeries or reveal the symptoms of disconnectedness from the self and the outside world in such diagnosis as autism, dyslexia and other reading disorders, attention span deficit, hyperactivity, depression (manic, chronic or other) schizophrenia, violence, just to name a few.

This logic categorizes the expectation itself of a child with diseases and disorders. A doctor in the United States explained to me the reason behind the signs on university campuses inviting students to the infirmary. The ads group pregnancy together with sexual diseases, the doctor said, since as a "natural", "biological" category, pregnancy is a parasitic growth with tumor-like behaviour. The point here is not to argue pro-life or pro-choice in the American political sense. The point is categorization itself that is not neutral but has the power to impart specific knowledge, logic and values. In the logic of a culture that emphasizes individualism and promotes egotism, indeed, any life that comes to depend on another, be it a child on a parent, a parent on a child, a friend on a friend, an unemployed on "social aid", etc., is seen as parasitic, as illness.

Thus, children who manage to appear in a world of totalitarian birth control and high-tech medical facilities are miracles indeed. These miracles begin to suffer and to battle for their existence before they are even conceived as an idea. When they are conceived as physical entities, their scream for love and their whole being are reduced to physical explanations.

North American scientists accentuate the "genetic" or "physiological" explanations to the various dilemmas concerning the human being. Everyday, scientists discover new genes: the murderous gene, the gay chromosome, the serotonin levels, and so forth. These explanations allow parents and all involved to ignore, with a somnified conscience, the symptoms of unhappiness, frustration, atrophy and decay. Instead of changing the system that causes this vacuum and pain, they dive deeper submerging their families in the ocean of material love and beloved purchases. Medication, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, criminologists, police, et al. are all necessary attributes in this system



of things, paid for by the parents' sacrifice of their children and love on the scaffold of civilization. In this regard, archaeology, phenomenology and hermeneutics were bound to take root in a culture that valued possessions.

Bourdieu defined Western materialism as a system in the relationship between the possessor and the object of possession in these terms:

"Legitimate manners owe their value to the fact that they manifest the rarest conditions of acquisition, that is, a social power over time which is tacitly recognized as the supreme excellence: to possess things from the past, i.e. accumulated, crystallized history, aristocratic names and titles, chateaux or 'stately homes', paintings and collections, vintage wines and antique furniture, is to master time, through all those things whose common feature is that they can only be acquired in the course of time, by means of time, against time, that is, by inheritance or through dispositions which, like the taste for old things, are likewise only acquired with time and applied by those who can take their time"

(*Distinction*, p.71).

It is as if things can secure immortality; as if they can vanquish the poverty of the spirit and the feebleness of the body. Today's parents are fetishists who consistently weaken their children with the contemporary lifestyle. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh note in their research on children's popular culture, a child's bedroom has become the nest or "haven of 'hyper consumerism' and popular culture fantasy" (113). In fact, the room, in itself, can be regarded as punishment, for, the authors further note that "[b]eing sent to one's room, as we see represented in the children's book by Maurice Sendak *Where the Wild Things Are* (1983) is regarded as punishment; it is not the same as going there freely..." (113). I would venture further in this connection: Consumerism is punishment!

Yet, consumerism is imposed on children as early as birth, and even prior to it. First, parents strive to "liberate" themselves financially and so they "liberate" themselves from the child - birth control is one tactic, extremely profitable for the medical industry, sterilization is another, which annihilates the idea of conception and creation itself. When they finally do have a child, they immediately set off to "liberate" themselves from the child again - this time with baby-sitters, nursery, day-care, school, tutors, extensions, etc. so as to be able to consecrate their time yet again to the "more important":

earning money and serving the "public" good (which public and what good is another question) by earning money and serving the offspring by earning money and spending it on strangers - the "professionals" - to provide care, health, safety, and curriculum. The more they earn, the more they claim to love, to be good parents and good members of society, and the more things they acquire.

But things do not appease the child's not yet totally stifled craving for love in the other, the non-material sense. The child screams and demands something which often neither she nor the adults know how to articulate, or perhaps even are not fully aware of - possibly a primeval instinct of being cuddled, snuggled, nursed, looked at, sniffed, pampered, protected, respected, and other such animal stuff. Instead, the civilized modern human being fights these instincts and imposes "independence" that amounts to: "my child is independent when s/he does not intrude into my space but has her own space which touches mine occasionally, between the baby-sitters, daycare, school, and work and without disrupting me".

Since money and objects have come to symbolize and have even replaced love, the child demands more and more and does not understand why all this love in the form of things does not satisfy the other, the primordial, the unspoken of and the repressed urge; that is until it mutes. Since how much a child is "loved" is also an indication of the child's place in society, then by the same logic, the more the child has the better s/he should feel among friends. Envy, competition, rivalry are bred by consumerism; and the fetishism of contemporary world thus demands ever more sacrifices and things.

At this point, a mini synthesis will help to connect the above ideas to the next part of the essay. Love, as a social construct, has undergone many operations. In a consumerist age, its meaning has become that of provision of things and the accumulation of capital to the point of loss of contact between people. Because things and capital derive their existence in a context of pain, exploitation and lies, any replacement of a living being with things replaces love with pain, exploitation and lies. Apart from unhappiness, this breeds pathological mistrust between people on many levels: adults don't trust each, they don't trust their own children and children grow up to mistrust everyone else, including, or perhaps in the first place, their own parents (and seen the wider picture, of course rightly so). Love as the energy of creation, of transmission of a part of oneself to another, whether as personal creativity or cultural or biological

reproduction, has been consistently fading away. It is therefore not surprising that consumerist art such as Andy Warhol's would be chosen to represent contemporary experience: flat, compulsive and sterile.

### ***on Love: the question of Sex***

Western doctors, the overseers of social "health", urge parents to think about sexual relationships and career before pregnancy, during pregnancy and postpartum.

The highly complex phenomenon of sexual energy – the yearning for fulfillment and creative togetherness is thus reduced to sexual intercourse for the sake of pleasure tantamount to the consumption of sterile, genetically modified food. Sterile sexuality is empty pleasure that has no possibility, not even a chance of creativity. This is not to say that sexual intercourse necessarily has to take place with the intention to reproduce. But when the idea of creation – any kind (artistic or biological) - at any point of a union between two people has been a priori eliminated, the physiological act itself breathes emptiness, death.

At the same time, the need to connect with someone for the expression of such creativity, the pleasure of creation sought in a union, can be misinterpreted as a sexual need, because in its basic sense, the act of creation gives the pleasure of satisfaction. The "market" can cash well on this urge particularly when it is not satisfied, but almost. Hence, the capitalist "curriculum" promotes sterile sexuality and the medical capitalist plays an important role in this.

In Montreal, I have spoken to 7 doctors, of whom 3 were male and 4 female and 7 nurses (all female). Most of them were from the CLSC, the centralized governmental health association that establishes clinics in every neighbourhood of the province of Quebec. All were shocked that I nursed my child for about 4 years. I pointed out that even UNICEF stipulates nursing for NOT less than a year, preferably two, with no supplements during the first 6 months, while anthropologist Katherine Dettwyler, editor of *Breastfeeding: Biocultural Perspectives*, offers a wider span for nursing human babies ranging from a minimum of 2 ½ years to a maximum of 7. According to her research, societies, in which children are allowed to

nurse as long as they want to, children usually self-wean with no arguments or emotional trauma, between three and four years of age. "Another important consideration for the older child is that they are able to maintain their emotional attachment to a person rather than being forced to switch to an inanimate object such as a teddy bear or blanket. I think this sets the stage for a life of people-orientation, rather than materialism, and I think that is a good thing," says Dettwyler.

To return to my physicians, doctor Janice's words express perfectly the opinions of the rest of my respondents. "Yes, the UN recommends that [minimum one year]. So, one year is enough. You should wean after that. Such abnormal nursing is bad for the family. The child will grow dependent, and nursing lowers the mother's sexual drive, which can cause problems in the family later on and will harm the baby".

Apart from the minimum standard being good enough for a child, this attitude touches on several other issues. First, it raises the question of child dependency/independency discussed above and where cruelty and abandonment are presented as the meaning of love. Second, it expects the child and the mother to adapt their nature to the male sexual standards, rather than vice versa (democracy, i.e. the totalitarianism of numbers, does not apply in this case). Third, this makes sense politically and economically, for socialized sexuality needs to consume sexy attire, make-up, diets, birth-regulation methods, cars, furniture, entertainment, ad infinitum.

But is all this really inevitable?

### ***on Making Things: questions of Respect***

This is an excerpt from my journal marked 'autumn, 2002'.

Having been inspired among others by Korchack and Nikitins, Sasha and I interpreted "love" in a non-commercial sense and chose, first of all, to be "there" for our daughter Liouba, which meant being less "out there" in the social world. This meant less material means, living space, time and energy.

The decision forced us to rely on meagre supplies and sharpened the imagination and artisan skills not only of the parents, but also Liouba's. One such example is Liouba's "town-house". The second floor, its original construction, in a previous existence used to be a television box. Liouba hid inside the box when she was 1 year and 10 months and said, "ku-ku",

shutting and opening the lid. I cut out windows, she decided where she wanted to have the door; we dug out colourful old rags and together patched a joyful mosaic on the outside. She painted the inside with pencils and crayons. The ground floor came later. Liouba and her dad made it from the remains of the wood with which dad made our bed and wardrobe. She decorated it in bright acrylic colours, while I "filled in the gaps".

The house has a meaning and a purpose. First, it served as an outlet for spontaneous creativity. Second, it is a sign of independence and potency: one can create something almost from nothing, and that makes it different from the children's houses purchased in stores, because contrary to commercial toys that snatch everything from the lives of the underpaid workers who make them and from the working parents who purchase them, this house saved matter that would have gone to waste and brought us together. Creativity can be simultaneously aesthetic and practical.

The house has become Liouba's hiding place, her possibility for seclusion. While she uses the whole apartment as hers, she also knows that she shares it with others. In fact, she relies on the knowledge that she can always find someone somewhere, be it in the kitchen, the living room, the office, or the bathroom; even her room - someone might always knock or she, herself, may call one of us in. However, her little, dancing with sunny colours house is outside our reach. She trusts our respect for her privacy. At the basis of this respect live our love and our trust – mutual.

### ***on Using Things: questions of Trust and Respect***

Apart from the example of the house, we decided to give Liouba the trust and an opportunity to decide in all other areas of her experience as well, such as to train herself to be wise, confident, strong and independent as well as to test our own principles. The Skripalev sports-complex that we installed in her room illustrates this relationship.

Pictures 2 and 3 portray the sports-complex we brought with us from Russia. It has rings, a rope ladder, a wooden ladder, a fixed ladder, a swinging ladder, a rope, an elastic liana, a swinging gymnast's bar, a fixed bar and the slide which leads to her bunk bed. Liouba had this sports complex since she was 4 months old, and the only rule regarding its use has been the same that the Nikitins used in their home: namely, that no adult interferes with suggestions or help to reach something that she can

not do by herself. This way she can only do what she is ready to do. By the age of three, she could climb anywhere and could reach any spot in the room without touching the floor. When Liouba's friends come, we do not allow the parents to come in and "help" their children. Even though many children are weak and mostly unable to support their own body weight with their arms and swing, they learn quickly how and where to climb and when it is time to leave, most parents have difficulty getting them down from under the ceiling.

This example points to the relationship between parents and child. It is not the sports complex by itself that "evolves" Liouba into a more mature and confident child. The complex is only an artificial substitute for the massive possibilities offered by forests, riverbank slopes, climbing country-house roofs, and so forth of which we are denied in city existence, particularly in capitalist settings, where the poor underdeveloped public transportation infrastructure, hefty fees, private property laws, the destruction of natural resources, etc. render space and nature inaccessible. However, our approach to the object, to the meanings attached to our approach of this object and to the limitations or the liberties that we ascribe to our child point to who we are.

Our trust does not end here, however. It extends to Liouba's decision making with regard to other aspects of her life such as toilet training (at 4 months of age), nursing (till 3 ½ years with a break and finally till 4 years and 2 months), and her decision to take off to Russia without her mom.

### ***On Things: Questions of Mistrust***

Since the 1950s in the Soviet Union, Lena Alexeevna Nikitina and Boris Pavlovich Nikitin, have been warning that children's most vicious enemy is, in fact, the adults' mistrust that begins with holding the child when she walks, helping her up when she falls, forbidding her to climb "dangerous" stairs even on the primitive children's playgrounds marked "for use between 0-3 years old", picking up the child and sticking her on the slide, constantly telling her what to do or not, wear, eat, feel, think, and so on, in other words exercising total control. Mistrust is also manifested in speaking for the child, putting words in her mouth, branding, evaluating, "helping" and "teaching". Finally, it takes the form of siding with the institution in the adult

endeavor to reconstruct the child from a curious individual to an obedient consumer of things and of instruction<sup>1</sup>.

Protective behaviour on the part of adults may, at first glance, seem harmless, even benign. In the long run, it affects the physical, emotional, and mental development, where the child forfeits a chance to learn to trust her own abilities and limitations. The absence of those inner sources of self-regulation creates outright danger and is at the basis of much stress and "failure" of the future-adult. Moreover, mistrust sends children the following message: adults treat anyone smaller and weaker than themselves as frail, handicapped, even insipid. People call such behaviour "careful", "protective", "caring", "loving". Since this is love, children learn to suppress their frustration and to accept the adults' control and their own failure. Later, they reproduce this love, care and protection with younger ones, but also with their own parents by then grown old, child-like and frail and thus continue the cycle.

The Nikitins call for trusting the child, providing her with an emotionally safe and enriching environment rather than limitations and control. Such attitude would raise the curiosity, creativity and confidence levels to the extent that parents would not need consumerism to replace family relations, because an independent child will know how to make toys, invent games or find answers to questions about the self and the world. However, what can such freedom mean in a context that breeds consumerism? We thus come back to the same question, that of interpretation and categorization.

What would allowing the child to investigate experience and choose her own categories mean in a capitalist setting? For example, Françoise Dolto advises parents to pay children for household chores in order to help them become autonomous and conscientious workers. Or, at the Childhoods 2005 conference in Oslo, numerous presentations focused on the "positive" aspects of consumerism and called for the participation of children in this sphere – they equated participation in consumerism with "empowerment" and "independence".

But the problem is that a child who receives a few dollars for washing the dishes does not learn independence, rather the contrary: to succumb to the will of others, to do them services in return for a

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<sup>1</sup> Interesting that in Latin languages the term 'instruction' has two components: education and directives.

reward set by the more powerful. In this case, the child does not do the dishes because s/he uses them or to participate in family life. The child does them for a materialistic end in order to get something from materialistic parents. It goes without saying that having children do schoolwork for grades and for the promise of material bliss in the “future” is part of the same strategy that markets obedience, consumerism, misery and mistrust, a strategy that shuffles meanings, sells 500ml juice in 750ml bottles, substitutes bright packages of favourite monsters on TV with yogurt derived from miserable cows and chemical laboratories, and so on, ad infinitum. In all of this, parents, instead of siding with their children and protecting them, end up being the prime vehicles of capitalist meaning.

### ***On Issues that objectify: Trust in Institution***

The complexity of the notion of trust extends to everything that touches a person’s life. What, who, why, how, when can we trust concerns not only the quality of life that we expect but, on a primordial level, our survival. Trust/mistrust is part of a complex process of the way we react to strangers and others almost on the level of our basic instinct. But what is this instinct in today’s “civilized” “occidental” context? Let us turn to a concrete example of how parents can “choose” whom to trust and whom to mistrust.

On a Tuesday in July 2004, Liouba (5) and I had an appointment with her friends at a playground at 4pm. To profit from a lovely day outdoors, we arrived an hour earlier. “Liouba, Liouba,” we heard someone shout from the slides and saw her friend, Celine (5 years old) waving. Celine was out with her kindergarten group. Liouba joined them, but in 10 minutes the teachers rounded up the day-care kids and went back to school.

“Don’t worry, Liouba,” I comforted her. “In less than an hour you’ll see Celine”. We left the playground to wash our hands and eat our lunch returning at least 30 minutes after the kindergarten was gone. I took out my knitting while Liouba went to play in the sand when suddenly a woman approaches us with a screaming boy.

“Whose child is this?”

His face was so distorted with distress that I failed to recognize him at first. Then I saw that it was Todd, Celine’s 3-year-old brother. “How did you end up here”, I asked. “Bwwwwwwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa” was the



heartbreaking reply. The woman who had found him said he was screaming for at least 20 minutes and she couldn't make sense of what he said. Soon after Todd realized that Liouba and I were there, he cheered up and just as he began to play, a panic stricken day-care teacher appeared, looking for a forgotten child.

"Did he stay behind with you," she asked me.

"No, we didn't even know he was out with this group" I replied and was curious to hear the version that will be presented to Todd's parents.

Soon after the incident, we see Karen, Arnold and the kids. "So, you kept Todd behind at the playground," was their greeting. The kindergarten didn't even bother to make up a story that would not contradict my testimony. I should, also, mention that this neighbourhood and the kindergarten were considered among the prestigious parts of town and one of the best day-care establishments in Montreal.

It seemed to me that the parents were annoyed that I witnessed a serious bluff by the prestigious institution to which they belonged. I explained that we didn't even know that Todd was with the group, that we found him at least half an hour after the kindergarten was gone and that, in fact, he was found by a stranger. However, Karen interrupted me briskly pressing with the Kindergarten's version.

It is interesting that Karen and Arnold made the decision in favour of the Institution. Not only that, they made it as if they were that Institution. As parents, they did not want to get in conflict with the kindergarten but as part of that institution, they wanted to convince me, a witness to the institution's fiasco, of its competence.

"Well, errors happen," insisted Karen, "so they forgot him for a few minutes..."

"More than 30," I interjected.

"No, it wasn't 30 minutes, it was 2 minutes. I know. They told me they went back immediately when they realized they had left him with you," persisted Karen.

"Actually, they didn't know that we were here, so they didn't leave him with us. Plus, how do you know at what point did their realization come? They could have realized this when they were getting the kids ready to be picked up by the parents. And, do you think that between me and them, I have more reasons to lie about what happened?"

"I don't know why you insist on slandering them. All I know is that Laurel said that as soon as they had reached the kindergarten, she realized Todd was missing and ran back immediately and it couldn't have been more than 5 or 10 minutes...."

Todd's suffering (for whatever number of minutes) and the danger to which he had been exposed did not seem to shake his parents' faith in their prestigious institution.

One of the difficulties in anthropology is also its strong asset, namely, the degree to which we can take a specific example, even if it may seem anomalous, and generalize it to the extent of claiming to understand society better. In the example above, we can say that, "well, statistically it is not frequent that kindergartens forget kids behind; this is an exception and hopefully it will teach Laurel and her colleagues to be more vigilant in the future". What the above incident exposes, though, is the general aspect of human/institutional relations, which means that even when the abstract and the general become concrete and personal, the institution has been incorporated in the self to the point that an individual would think and live through it and on behalf of it at the expense of personal instincts. Even if personal reactions to the incident may vary: some people would scream at Laurel, others might sue or pull out their kids only to place them in the same institution elsewhere – the child is still surrendered.

The question of trust is multifaceted. Some of its aspects are revealed in situations of conflict between the child and educator, where parents mostly side with the Institution: they trust doctors, teachers, psychiatrists with questions ranging from toilet training to Prozac, rarely pausing to ask the child's opinion or to listen to what the "medical" symptoms might be telling about the context of family relations. Instead of listening to the scream of despair, parents side with the "professional" - the Institution - and read the disorder symptoms as medical conditions to be remedied by the "professional" and according to "professional" norms and needs that aim at manufacturing a docile child manageable for the troupe of overseers of social order and capitalist interests.

Karen and Arnold's trust choice could have been economically stimulated: they want to earn money and do not want to keep the kids at home like some home-schoolers do, who are either rich and can "afford it" or are really "poor" because of the sacrifices society imposes on those who choose to raise their own kids – by economy, I also mean the social, symbolic capital that comes along with a child being part of a prestigious institution. However there is more to their story. Trust in authority comes not only as a rational choice, but as an irrational reflex, undermining the basic parental instinct that normally would push a parent to protect offspring - including from strangers,

who the nursery and kindergarten employees really are – and here we touch on a general trend of contemporary “civilized” society, which, paradoxically, through individual greed stupidifies to totalitarian obedience.

Finally, when we give our trust to a children’s institution, we inevitably strip it away from the child pointing to an inherent dichotomy between the interests of a child and those of the Institution in charge of children.

## **Conclusion:**

### ***On the Study of Things: Phenomenology, et al***

Consumerism and desires are excellent tools of control over some (many) people and of profit for other, fewer people. In this way, everything – from the setting of a room to what we eat and do - is part of a person’s relationship with the world. Desire for objects exercises a power over the individual who has to conduct specific services and tasks in order to be able to obtain the money to buy the objects of desire (in this logic, people also acquire the status of objects). The invention of money made it possible for some people to control the lives, effort, work and desires of others and to dictate to them what to purchase and where and how to spend time. Hence, on the one hand, things – when used moderately and wisely - can be assets in enhancing independence and freeing time, yet at the same time, they can be a dangerous enemy to creativity, dexterousness, and independence. Objects and habitat can be slippery “texts” – for, interpretation obeys the common and uncommon senses of the beholder.

It is like two neighbours with two identical Jeeps: Jill has the car in order to camp in the forest, while Jack keeps it in order to improve his social status. He gives up many occasions for travel so as not to increase mileage and even sustains himself in order to service and maintain the vehicle. Both Jack and Jill may be seen every Sunday afternoon scrupulously washing and oiling their respective Jeeps in their respective backyards. Behind the exchanged greetings each might even harbour a warm feeling of sharing something together that

others, who do not spend their Sunday afternoons in love and gratitude with their Jeeps, may not understand. However, are the relationships, rationale, methods, consequences, or feelings the same, in spite of their similar contribution to car industry and global capitalism? For, Jill beautifies her car after three days of adventure and life in the wilderness (regardless of its effects on the forests she tramps, on the labour markets of the "Developing" (slaving) World that makes the Jeep a possibility for her, or the oil fields of the middle East), while Jack rubs his in order to keep out the rust, to touch and dust his beloved with tenderness, this Jeep that adorns his self and which by its mere existence provides his life with meaning? What is this meaning?

It is interesting to note that the phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches have taken root in Occidental thought at a time when industrialization has made things overabundant and people over-dependent (on things as well, and as bad).

Phenomenology could thus be a tricky method unless the investigator uses it most cautiously in order to reveal the dislexic, schizophrenic<sup>2</sup>, contradictory and redundant nature, feelings and relationships between people, meaning and objects. An attempt to elucidate how and why would a person acquire or use a particular object can point to the semantic relationship with the object as well as to the effects of this relationship on people and the environment all the while the mischievous objects themselves remain slyly deaf, dumb, and numb.

My concern is to take the study of objects beyond its current scope and the status quo of the illusory progress of humanity and the material evolution of things, in order to find other possible ways of living with people and things, possibly with less things and preferably with self-made; because, when we spend time and effort making our own, we make only what is necessary, mostly of recycled matter and do not need to exploit the natural and human resources of the planet in order to buy things we don't need thus making some few people even wealthier and most others tragically devoid of any possibility for love in any sense. For, when one is constantly hungry and bugged for time, effort and resources, what love can such a person give?

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<sup>2</sup> The term "schizophrenia" comes from Greek meaning "split mind" referring to the condition when a person is "split from reality".

Tragically, though, most social scientists, educators, media, politicians and others continue to use terms that foster negative impressions of people and societies where things are scarce. They call them "poor", "primitive", "developing"... and in naming them as such sustain the value and cultivate the desire for the possession of things. Poverty has been invented as the stress and pressure to possess. It is this stress and pressure that make industrialism and capitalism flourish and which forces people to serve the capitalist and the industrialist. And once you rob people of their time and the possibility for independence, you get workers and consumers.

Therefore, an attempt to answer the question of what makes people want and acquire things inevitably leads to the question of self, relationships, and love; but all these in a different light from the simplistic formula: I want therefore I love or vice versa. The trade-off involved - in the bargain of wanting and ceding and in the schizophrenic use of terminology - reveals our reliance on linguistic and social structures that control us and prescribe particular actions and desires. In simple words, love, objects and objectifications point to fundamental ways of existence.

### ***Finale: on love, objects, and objections***

No essay can avoid touching on politics, particularly one that discusses desires, objects and love. In a world where even the size of one's foot becomes an economic, and therefore political, issue – the amount of foot paraphernalia that can be made, advertised and sold is astounding (Nike vs Adidas vs self-made boots) – love is the easiest merchandise and, concurrently, an excellent political and economic tool in a global hierarchy, a pyramid of those who sell, buy, and control with the millions at the bottom who carry the pyramid on their backs and who still buy and consume what the industrialist/capitalist provides, ironically with their own labour and sacrifices.

In this way, the setting of a room with all its objects is part of the relationship that a person forms with her world and the question of trust, respect and love veils the discrepancies in the meaning and application of these notions.

Even the so-called charity or aid programmes perpetuate dependence: in the summer of 2005 in Montreal, a charity

organization was raising money to serve better meals at schools in “disadvantaged neighbourhoods”, without considering that instead of paying the salaries of the administrators of such projects or administrators in general, it would have been more sincere to value each person’s effort equally: a garbage collector’s pay should be no less than a tax collector’s, actually the tax collector already receives his bonus in the fact that his garbage does not stink; or consider the question of why is the effort behind the pesos or the rouble less valuable than the one behind the dollar or the euro. If this is too utopic for some, another option could be to simply donate enough money to the poor so that they, themselves, could provide nourishment to their kids – emotional included. Instead, the system makes the poor, too, depend on consuming what it deems fit for them to consume managing them within the purposefully circumscribed space of tragedy and despair. Finally, the poor and the wealthy, together, abandon their children in the despotic wilderness of the Institution for some to become predators and others obedient prey.

In this light, the parents’ reaction to Todd’s abandonment by the school does not come as a surprise. Long before the school abandoned Todd, they, themselves, had abandoned him in a race for material and symbolic capital.

To return to the beginning, Korchak's example shows a different approach to love than what is common in the consumer society. He does not objectify the "object" of his love nor does he replace it with objects or contradictory meanings. The semantic meaning of his words remains consistent with his actions. He said he would not abandon these children and he stayed with them even in vanishing - a presence in that which is no longer physically seen or known. He is actively present, even in death and thus fulfills his promise of love.

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