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DISENCHANTMENT AND THE CITY OF LOST CHILDREN

Résumé: La Cité des enfants perdus de Jean-Pierre Jeunet et Marc Caro s’interroge sur l’écart qui sépare l’enfance, telle que vécue par les enfants, et le rêve de l’enfance, tel que conçu par l’imaginaire culturel. À partir des travaux d’Arjun Appadurai sur la marchandisation des enfants, les auteurs montrent comment le film examine, par des images fantastiques mais avec beaucoup de sérieux, la perte (ou l’absence) de l’innocence et de l’enchantement, inévitable dans un monde capitaliste, et investigue les tactiques que les enfants emploient pour assurer leur propre survie et donner un sens à cette survie.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro’s film, The City of Lost Children (France, 1995) explores the space between childhood as children experience it, and the dream of childhood that resonates in the cultural imaginary. With a mise en scène, plot, and characterisations that call up the fairy tales we, the children of Europe, may have grown up with, it addresses with fantastical imagery yet serious intent the loss (or, rather, the absence) of innocence and enchantment that necessarily obtains in a capitalist world. But while it offers up childhood as a disenchanted realm, it also provides a consolation by showing that there are tactics its characters can deploy, both to survive, and to make their survival meaningful to themselves. It is, then, a film about childhood, or rather, it is about the ways the adult world constructs, and then appropriates, childhood. This paper offers an analysis of the film’s representation of childhood through an application of Arjun Appadurai’s work on commoditisation and Jean Baudrillard’s writings on the postmodern culture of simulation.

First, though, it is important to take note of the extent to which the category of “the child” and other related categories (youth, adolescence) are treated as if there were an unreflective acceptance of a straightforward relationship between the category and the set of positivities or markers that constitute it. But as the
work of writers such as Philippe Aries and Michel Foucault demonstrate, this “understanding” is the result of a tremendous “incitement to discourse,” dating from the sixteenth century and gathering particular momentum in the last two hundred years. This discourse has taken these categories as its objects of study, analysis, evaluation, surveillance and regulation and, simultaneously, brought them into being, clarified them, and filled them in through the production of criteria, exemplifications, policies and laws. Consider the opening paragraph of Aries’ Centuries of Childhood:

A man of the sixteenth or the seventeenth century would be astonished at the exigencies with regard to civil status to which we submit quite naturally. As soon as our children start to talk, we teach them their name, their age and their parents’ name. We are extremely proud when little Paul, asked how old he is, replies correctly that he is two and a half. We feel in fact that it is a matter of importance that little Paul should get this right: what would become of him if he forgot his age? In the African bush, age is still quite an obscure notion, something which is not so important that one cannot forget it. But in our technical civilization, how could anyone forget the exact date of his birth, when he has to remember it for almost every application he makes, every document he signs, every form he fills in. In the Middle Ages the Christian name had been considered too imprecise a description, and it had been found necessary to complete it with a surname, a place name in many cases. And now it has become advisable to add a further detail, the numerical character, the age. The Christian name belongs to the world of fancy, the surname to that of tradition. The age, a quantity legally measurable to within a few hours, comes from another world, that of precise figures.1

What Aries does here in describing the social production of childhood identity is compatible, to a certain extent, with Foucault’s work on the relation between discourse and institutions: with their rules, regulations, categories and devices of evaluation and measurement, on the one hand, and ideas of the regulation, normalisation, production and surveillance of subjects, on the other.

Foucault elaborates, in the first volume of The History of Sexuality, on the ways in which the bodies of the various categories of “the people,” including children, became scrutinised for signs and symptoms that would show their health and normality—or otherwise. From birth, he argues, the subject’s body is evaluated, measured, tested and categorised (by doctors, nurses, parents, extended family, educators, health officials, agents of religious groups) with the purpose of reading and determining the “truth” of the body. Foucault writes, for instance,

In the sexualization of childhood, there was formed the idea of a sex that was both present (from the evidence of anatomy) and absent (from the standpoint of physiology), present too if one considered its activity, and deficient if one referred to its reproductive finality; or again, actual in its manifestations, but hidden in its eventual effects, whose pathological seriousness would only become apparent later.2

If there was a dominant perspective with regard to the sexualizing of childhood, it was not constituted by a set of positivities, but, according to Foucault, by an “interplay of presence and absence, the visible and the hidden.”3 This condition of the “truth” of childhood can be understood as discursively explicable and stable, but it is also a site of discursive contestation involving various fields of activity which produce more or less contingent “truths” lacking in final authorisation.

Now this notion of the category of childhood as a site of contestation doesn’t mean that there weren’t (and aren’t) orders of discourse authorised to designate what is a normal, healthy child. What it means, rather, is that such authorisation, and the narratives, criteria and categories it produces, are limited and provisional, and subject to all kinds of challenges and discursive appropriations. This has become reasonably obvious in recent times, when these categories have undergone something of a crisis because of various pressures, most particularly within capitalist societies where the categories of child and youth are increasingly subjected to what we might term the “logic of the market.”

Childhood, for the everyday adult world, is understood variously—as a stage, a concept, a category, but perhaps most of all, as a dream of innocence, freedom, and trust. As such, childhood is a highly privileged state, at least in principle, and is also highly marketable. Wide-eyed children are used by advertisers to “sell” banks, family cars, and new government policies, and by social groups to “sell” their issues: family values, universal education, regulation of pedophilia, and so on. The City of Lost Children plays with these dreams and uses of childhood, and in the process complicates its “simplicity,” showing instead a childhood world where adults are exploitative, dreams become full of sinister intent, and innocence exists only to be corrupted.

The opening sequence, in this regard, summarizes the whole film. The camera frames a realistic image of a traditional, charming Christmas scene, where a small child, pyjama’ed and in bed in a room filled with toys, watches wide-eyed as Santa emerges from the chimney to offer him a wind-up toy. The child initially seems taken with this; the soundtrack plays a lilting and lyrical arrangement of strings; the impression is of the sanctity of childhood and children’s dreams of Christmas. But this illusion quickly breaks down as one Santa after another emerges from the chimney in a relentless reiteration that turns the enchantment of Christmas to something threatening. A heavy bass line comes in below the violins; the walls and ceiling and furniture sway and melt; the
Santas crowd the bedroom space, sipping from hip flasks, touching everything in the room; the noise builds to cacophony; the reindeer shits on the floor. The child bursts into frightened tears, scrambles out of his crib and, keeping a fearful eye on the Santas, snatches up his teddy bear from a shelf. The child’s enchanted world has become a nightmare.

As it turns out, it is an actual, not a metaphoric, nightmare. The dream-scene segues to one of the central venues in the film, a rig in a harbour, which houses a Frankensteinian laboratory. Here we see Krank, the chemically generated “evil genius,” strapped into a bizarre Heath Robinson contraption which allows him to extract children’s dreams. Infected by the child’s terror, the unconscious Krank is howling along with the small boy, which sets off the six clone “brothers” (all played by Dominique Pinon) who one by one join in the crying, sobbing and shrieking. The glass on the old valves shatters, the sound escalates and then subsides to hover around the thin small cry of the child while the theme music, arranged for violins, plays at a quick tempo. Krank awakens, enraged, snatches up the child’s teddy bear and beats it savagely before hurling it into the harbour where it floats towards some World War II-style mines.

In this first pair of scenes, the movie’s central threads are revealed: the nightmare that masquerades as children’s dreams, the commoditisation and corruption of innocence in the service of self-interest, and, above all, the disenchantment of the world of childhood. The bleakness of the world is mirrored in the setting: an unnamed and perpetually dark and fog-bound French port which resembles a cross between the London of Jack the Ripper and Kafka’s angst-ridden Prague. The characters are a bewildering assemblage of clones and cyborgs and mythical characters. The buildings, machines, street lights and other aspects of the cityscape all seem to be made of the same material, and to merge into a largely undifferentiated mass. The green filter over the whole scene—which in the laboratory, across the harbour, or in domestic interiors—renders a sickly light that taints every scene. People appear and disappear in the cityscape or through the sea or the fog, in an environment that is constantly dark and dank, and set, Caro says, in “a retro future, a former future.” The dirt, the excessive size of objects, the complex interconnections of machinery, the hand-turned gramaphones, and the absence of the familiar clean lines of digital technology are reminiscent of late nineteenth century factories and of what is now practically a mythic past.

The film works through a combination of such conceptual and visual devices. The soundtrack shifts mood from dream to nightmare, and the constant insistence on excess and ludicrous repetition moves the affect through humour to a parodic horror. The film never provides its audience with a secure viewing position: the perspective slips without warning from that of a prelinguistic child, to the fish-eye view of Irvin—an artificial brain grown in a bottle and housed in a tank—and then to Fleaeks, the flea-assassin. And this fluidity of perspective informs the filmic narrative; it critiques capitalist excess, and yet uses excess in its many visual jokes (in the Toon Town-esque scene where Miette and One are wrapped in thick ropes from neck to ankle, for instance); it calls up mythology (in the reference to the Cyclops), yet is retro-present in its temporal setting (the “Cyclopes” are really cyborgs); it deplores the loss of childhood, yet questions whether childhood as such exists outside of adult discourse.

There are three main motivating forces that drive the narrative. Krank is unable to dream, a deficiency which is making him age rapidly, and which drives him to extract the dreams of kidnapped children in a hopeless attempt to become human. The other main character, One, becomes Krank’s nemesis because One’s “petit frère,” Denée, has been kidnapped and sold to Krank. One’s efforts to recover Denée lead to Krank’s downfall, and hence can be read as the drive to protect and restore, one (One) motivated by love and innocence.

The third motivating force is exemplified by virtually all the other adults in the film, particularly the Cyclopes, members of a quasi-religious cult who have responded to the call to “renounce the gift of sight,” and the Octopus, a Fagin-type role occupied by conjoined twin sisters who are virtually—fantastically—a single entity, so connected that they share the same thoughts and sentences. If one eats food, the other tastes it; if one speaks, the other joins in with the same words, using the same tone; until their end they are indistinguishable and interchangeable. The concern, or drive, of these characters is personal interest—money and/or power—and they ruthlessly and enthusiastically exploit children to attain their ends. So, from the sleazy sideshows to the obscene Cyclopes, from the organised criminals to the empty, littered streets, the film text represents two main and interrelated features: it is strongly capitalist, and recognisably postmodern.

The capitalist motif pervades the film in one form or another, precisely because almost everybody is marked out and treated, first and foremost, in terms of what Arjun Appadurai calls the process of commoditisation. This, for Appadurai, refers to the situation in which things or people are “produced” (socially, discursively) predominantly in terms of their exchange value. In the film, the children are the primary examples of this sort of social and discursive production. They are either kidnapped by the Cyclopes for sale to Krank (i.e., first their persons and then their dreams are commoditised), or else they are used by criminal elements as thieves and pickpockets (their small size, agility and unthreatening demeanour making them invaluable in this regard). But the commoditisation of individuals is also played out in the fact that, for the most part, the characters in the movie are indistinguishable or fully exchangeable and are dehumanised further by their various prostheses and machine-like functions.

The children, for instance, are a ragtag collection of urban orphans, of similar size, dressed similarly in ill-fitting hand-me-downs, and similarly grubby. The Octopus is a pair of almost identical sisters who care for no one beyond themselves,
except insofar as others can be used for the sisters’ interests (who themselves are shown, finally, to share no bond of loyalty for each other). The Cyclopes dress similarly, peer through their prosthetic eyes like strange birds, and turn on one another without hesitation. Krank’s assistants, the clones, are also identical, utterly interchangeable, and defined only in terms of the tasks they undertake to keep Krank amused or contented. This multiplicity and indistinguishability is a central feature of the film, a creative move which effectively challenges the notion of inalienable humanness or individuality.

There are, however, a few rare exceptions. The most obvious, and perhaps the most significant, is One, whose name points to his individuality and inalienable character. His physical appearance (as a grotesque) and his personal qualities (as a “moron,” according to the other characters) attest to this. Indeed, he seems to be possessed of what is virtually a Flaubertian “simple heart.” But nonetheless, he can read his social context—whether in his previous capacity as whaler, or his present capacity as inadvertent defender of the innocents—because of these very features, which set him outside the exploitative and cynical adult world. Once he has heard the whales sing, he can no longer harpoon them; when he hears an infant cry, he adopts him and will go to any lengths to protect him. But he is never an economic subject capable of making reasoned decisions. Driven instead by emotion and duty—hence called a “moron”—he is, in fact, a child among adults.

Miette, by contrast, is an adult among children—both cynical and knowing. “You’re born in the gutter,” she says, balancing on a plank over the water while she awaits her death, “and you end up in the port.” Though her name, which means “scrap” or “crumb,” indicates her lack of social status, she is in fact both significant and singular. She is the only girl orphan; she is the focal point for all the little boys in the school; the Octopuses see her as simultaneously their best chance and their greatest threat (when she deserts them, they attempt twice to engineer her death); she becomes, simultaneously, One’s “love interest” and his new “petite soeur,” and although like the other orphans she is acutely aware of their status as commodities, she is the only child who breaks away from their world.

Other characters who seem to avoid the status of pure commodity include the “scientist” Krank and his “associé” Irvin (a brain in a fishbowl). Though both are artificially constructed beings, still they are, like One and Miette, unique and identifiable. They are solitary characters, marked by their physical and intellectual distinction from the other males at the lab, and both are deeply, and violently, dissatisfied.

The relentless multiplicity and exchangeability of all but these central characters, and of virtually all the settings in the mise en scène, represent the loss of inherent individual value, which the film seems to privilege as an explanation for the disenchantment of the world and the concomitant corruption of its children. But there is a redemptive possibility in the person of Denrée, One’s “petit frère,” despite the fact that he is too little to speak or, in fact, take any significant action. Because he has no fear and no concerns beyond his prodigious appetite, and because One loves him in a non-self-interested manner and conveys this to Miette, Denrée serves as the “thing” that drives the action. He brings One and Miette together, eliciting from Miette a new innocence, an ability to trust and love, and finally, in his rescue and the related destruction of Krank’s laboratory, he points to the promise of a re-enchantment of the world.

This promise is reiterated and gently mocked throughout the film by the musical score (composed by Angelo Badalamenti, who is perhaps better known for his score for the Twin Peaks television series). It is in turn wistful, playful, and sinister. Badalamenti was instructed, Jeunet and Caro recall, to inscribe in the music the theme of the film. “We explained it clearly to him: ‘The film is sombre, the idea is not to darken it but rather to elevate it, to make it lyrical.’” And the music for the most part does this, in its reliance on light string music, though the lyrical element often seems ironically misplaced.

So, for instance, whenever the Cyclopes appear we hear what they must hear: the buzz and humming burr of each mechanical eye as it focuses on the object of its gaze. When they are waiting for the death of One and Miette, who are tied up and suspended above the harbour, we hear music from Marcello’s wind-up gramophone, which he plays to stimulate the murderous insanity in his poison-injected victims. This music is indeed lyrical, but is punctuated by the buzzing/burring of the Cyclopes’ mechanical eyes and “contaminated” by the theme music which seeps into and underscores the diegetic sounds, to counterpoint the action on screen. This conjunction of sounds provides not a lyrical experience, but an expression of irony, anxiety and violence.

The soundtrack can never be relied on to provide an unambiguous guide to the significance or emotional register of the narrative. Rather, it works to direct the reading of the film while undermining any principle of stability. It achieves this through a constant reiteration of the theme in varying registers and levels of intensity, always commenting on, or ironically problematising, the narrative. This can be seen on those occasions when the film starts to make sense in terms of generic conventions (the quest story, for instance, or the love story): the soundtrack slips quietly back in and appears to substantiate the “truth” of the quest theme by the drama and percussive quality of the orchestral sounds, or the love theme by the use of romantically swelling strings. But on each occasion, the music shifts into cacophony, or excess, and in this way undoes the genre story it had appeared to be “proving,” drawing viewers instead back into the world of nightmare and uncertainty.

In this way, it always reminds us of the problematic relationship of childhood to capitalist logic. The world of childhood is apparently antithetical to the world of capitalism because children are minors in contract law, because they are supposed to be protected from the lure of advertising, and because they...
aren't considered capable of rational decision-making. And yet, as shown by the tempting tinkle of piano and the alluring violin music that mark this film, children are always being seduced by capitalism and its possibilities. At the same time, though, this seduction is resisted: just as One will not be accommodated by the economic world, so too the children refuse to comply with its blandishments, and in virtually every scene that shows the adults attempting to lure the children, the latter respond with tears or teeth, while the extradiegetic music is darkened with the introduction of a heavy bass line.

This suggests the possibility that there is indeed something inalienable about being human, though it is a something that exists only for children and the childlike. The narrative of One's selflessness in respect to Denée and, incidentally, to others, implies a way of being that is antithetical to the behaviour of the rest of the characters and reveals an ongoing tension in the narrative concerning the nature of capitalism. On the one hand, capitalism is presented as enabling self-interest and freedom, as exemplified by the freedom to produce scientific developments (Krank), pursue religious ideas (the Cyclopses), and seek wealth (the Octopus). On the other hand, it exposes the deplorable effects of capitalist commoditisation, particularly the extinction of what we could call the inalienable values of society—all that is not reducible to, or explicable solely in terms of, the marketplace. The exploitation of childhood (the cynical orphans), of tenderness (the Original scientist, attacked and turned out by his own beloved creations), and of innocence (the terrified babies facing Krank) suggests that there is no place in capitalism for originality, disinterestedness, duty, self-reflective analysis, and other defining aspects of "the human."

While the film extensively develops these tensions, it doesn't resolve them. Instead, it places them within a complex machinery of desire operating against a backdrop of capitalism but never entirely subsumed by capitalism's interests. Whether cyborgs, clones or children, all the characters are produced by their desire and seek to satisfy it. The Cyclopses energetically articulate their desire—to enter the world of the Chosen Ones—and submit to an actual penetration of the camera-eye into their skulls. Denée is pure desire, seeking only to satisfy—in Krank's terms—his "nutritive urges." Each clone dreams that he is the Original. Miette and One want to be part of a nurturing family and, along the way, develop a relationship that is highly sexualised. The desire in each case isn't necessarily sexual and isn't necessarily pure self-interest, but it is no less powerful and physical for all that. And what this suggests is that there is more than a straightforward critique of capitalism operating in the film's narrative.

There is also an engagement with issues that have been taken up by postmodern discourse, which itself has an uneasy relationship with capitalism. This discursive space was, arguably, first articulated in the work of the Frankfurt School theorists, particularly Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, who discussed and critiqued capitalist development from related but diverging positions that have been translated, in various ways, into the postmodern world. For Benjamin, the capitalist system and its technologies strip away the "aura" that provides cultural artifacts with their innate value. He saw this process as a potentially liberating development because, in undermining notions such as originality and genius, it could facilitate a break from the authority of traditional discourses that served as arbiters of cultural value. For Adorno, however, this process, and the related market intervention in the field of culture was disastrous, because it meant the elimination of "human" faculties and virtues.

Benjamin and Adorno anticipated, in their different ways, what Baudrillard in his 1993 work *Symbolic Exchange and Death* terms the postmodern culture of simulation. For Baudrillard, the traditional discourses and values that ordered and helped make sense of the world have been replaced by a congeries of interchangeable copies (and copies of copies) which neither depend upon nor refer back to notions of origin, truth, or even verisimilitude. The film provides an example of this: we see the six clones played by Pinon well before the Original (the inventor) comes into view, and they are still characters in the film after the Original has been killed, something that problematises notions of authenticity and of a necessary referent.

Such a "precession of the simulacra" can partly come about, according to Baudrillard, because of the domination of capitalism. Value, rather than being eternal or inalienable, is now shown to be contingent, ephemeral, and entirely determined in the marketplace. But it also stems from the loss of authority of certain exclusive institutions and fields (such as religion, art, science, and government) which formerly either held a monopoly over the production of discourses or had the power to determine which discourses, ideas, explanations and stories constituted the truth. For Baudrillard and other theorists, these institutions and fields are either themselves now dominated by the field of commerce (as when science simply ends up serving and/or justifying commercial interests), or, if they remain relatively autonomous, their influence becomes negligible, so that they end up commenting on esoteric matters that are of interest only to people within the field.

The world of *The City of Lost Children* is almost entirely explicable in terms of the related "developments" of capitalist commoditisation and postmodern simulation. If children are a resource to be used either as a source of dreams or for criminal purposes, the same is true of the various fields and institutions which once circulated discourses, determined what constituted knowledge, and served as arbiters of value (and what constituted "inalienable" aspects of culture). Art, for instance, is embodied in Marcello, the decadent ex-circus performer, now an opium addict who mourns the end of his earlier triumphs and is forced by the Octopus twins (at one time his prized "freaks") to use his trained flea to attempt the assassination of Miette and One.

Much as art is shown to have no intrinsic value or endurance, science too...
is represented as debased. The scientist in the movie is “the Original,” the genius who, Irvin tells us, set up the laboratory, grew his wife and son in a test tube, and cloned himself to produce the six “brothers” who are now Krank’s assistants. The products of his work, though, turned on him, stole his memory (much as Krank now attempts to steal the dreams of children), and exiled him to a cave under the sea. The old habits of science still motivate him: he patrols the floor of the harbour, collecting detritus which he labels and catalogues, but otherwise he is as innocent and ignorant—and as much a threat—as is One.

Like science and art, the law and the family are also presented as debased, ineffective or vanishing. The police appear briefly in a sort of Keystone Cops scene in which an officer, running stiff-legged and blowing his whistle to stop the thieving orphans, is tripped by the children who then trot across him as though he were a bridge. The representatives of the law are not only ludicrous, the film suggests, but cannot be relied on: the police are never around to protect the children. And there is nothing resembling a conventional family in the film. “Families” are formed out of crisis or circumstance (One picked the infant Denrée out of a garbage tin; the “family” of the clones was a scientific experiment; the Octopus forms the orphan family only to exploit their earning power), and for the most part they are characterised by desperation, violence and exploitation rather than affection.

In its painstaking reproduction of this personal and physical world, the film seems to affirm the incontestable efficacy of the values and logics that inform it. And yet, as Certeau reminds us, stories can be repeated without necessarily reproducing their original sense, values or logic:

“Every telling seems the same in the structure into which the detail inserts itself, and yet both its functioning and its equilibrium are changed. The significance of a story that is well known, and therefore classifiable, can be reversed by a single ‘circumstantial’ detail. To ‘recite’ is to play on this extra element hidden in the felicitous stereotypes of the commonplace. The ‘insignificant detail’ inserted into the framework that supports it makes the commonplace produce other effects.”

The narrative of The City of Lost Children includes stories that are well-known: children forced into a life of crime; love and duty driving characters to perform heroic feats. However, the stories, for the most part, are not those that could constitute a challenge to, or allow for any differentiation from, the values promulgated by the marketplace. And yet this challenge is exactly what the film sets out to provide. It does so by producing a reversal of the discourse, an alternative narrative within the narrative structure of “disenchantment” and commoditisation.

This reverse narrative results from the insertion of the character of One into the apparently conventional narrative of a fallen, corrupt and cynical milieu which has sold off its inalienable dimension (duty, selflessness, childhood). One doesn’t understand the ways of this world (people are corrupt and exploitative; you need to be prepared to exploit others to survive). As a consequence, his naïveté and innocence “denaturalise” the logic of commoditisation, and while this creates danger and difficulties for him, his continued willingness to risk himself selflessly has a gradual, almost magical effect on the characters and the world around him, and eventually leads to the destruction of the exploiters and the redemption of the other characters.

This clearly doesn’t fit the dominant narrative of capitalism and commoditisation, and is emphatically based on and driven by Kantian values such as duty, selflessness, sacrifice, compassion and empathy. Those who are caught up in the capitalist framework, and commoditised, nonetheless find ways of escaping and/or hitting back: the children give Krank nightmares, not dreams; the orphans consistently cheat the Octopus and pursue their own agendas; the relentless pursuit of self-interest leads only to destruction. On the other hand, the characters who are treated sympathetically (One, Miette, even Marcello) are those who put their duty to others before their own interests or welfare—One with regard to Denrée, Miette with regard to One, and Marcello with regard to One and Miette. Within the parameters of the logic of commoditisation, this is plainly naïve, stupid and self-defeating. Hence One is presented as a kind of simpleton, yet Miette is prepared to lose her companions and to risk her life in helping him. But at the same time this naïve behaviour offers precisely the kinds of guarantees that are unavailable in Miette’s former dog-eat-dog existence. What motivates Miette to help One is the knowledge and conviction, gained in conversations with and observation of him, that his interest in Denrée, and indeed in her, is relatively “disinterested”—that is to say, it is based on his attachment to notions of principle, sympathy and love. This guarantee of trust produces, on her part, a similar “interested disinterestedness,” which drives her to break from her former life, and give herself over to helping him: a reversal that, in Certeau’s terms, “makes the commonplace produce other effects.”

There is a second reversal of this kind enacted within the film, only this time it applies to those who stand and live by the logic and values of their milieu. While commoditisation produces communities whose members prey on and exploit the weak and the naïve—the Octopus, the kidnappers, Krank—these communities are bound together not by trust or duty, but by contingency and fear. This means that the “biters” (those who prey on others) are always one small step removed from the re-bite occasioned by that same logic of exploitation. In fact, in most cases they turn on themselves: the dominant Cyclops murders his companions, and the Octopus dies as the sisters tear at each other’s hair and throats. The eventual demise of all the cynical communities in the film is brought about through such acts of communal “self-cannibalisation,” which makes the unlikely triumph of One and Miette possible. What the film does, then, is to reverse these two sets of logics—cynical self-interest and commoditisation, on the one hand, and love and selfless duty, on the other. The former, by virtue
of its inability to maintain any kind of stable community, becomes an embodiment of acting against one’s interests. The latter, because it treats “the other” not with regard to exchange value, but (theoretically) in terms of an inalienable Kantian value of “in itself,” provides the guarantees which make community possible. What this means, then, is that disinterestedness is very much in one’s (One’s) interests.

This strict moral framework is reproduced in any number of fairy tales and nursery rhymes: the innocent will, finally, escape; good will, ultimately, triumph. And at first blush it seems that the world of the film can be understood in terms of a fairy-tale world at once corrupt and threatening, but also magical and enchanted. Just as the commoditisation of the human leads to a re-bite (exploiters are exploited, deceivers are deceived, killers are killed), the same thing happens with regard to the relationship between the human and the non-human; that is, the world bites back. The trained flea sent to infect One with poison ends up infecting the kidnappers, causing them to kill one another. The evil sisters, driven crazy by the same poison, fall into the conflagration they set up for One and Miette. The science that built Krank’s empire blows it to pieces. And the fog-bound streets and buildings which conceal kidnappers and assassins hide One and Miette when they are trying to avoid those same people. The materiality of the milieu fails to obey its rulers; in a sense it is possessed by, and empathises with, “the good,” in the same way that a forest or animal might be “enchanted” in a fairy tale.

But The City of Lost Children is not a simple morality tale, or a simple critique of capitalism. It also places the concerns of capitalism and postmodernism within a moral framework. This is most clearly demonstrated in the romance of Miette and One, a romance that is utterly proscribed by the moral framework of the contemporary world. Children are not available for adult desire (though we may use them to sell products and principles); children have no sexuality (and so we must, as Foucault showed, make it impossible for them to explore their “absent” sexuality). But in this film, children are highly sexualised, though never according to the logic of pedophilia. Miette’s growing love for One is not that of the small child responding sexually to “Daddy.” Rather, she takes pity on One, and gradually empathises with him because of his disinterestedness. Aware from the start of the possibilities for intimacy between them, she manages their relationship in a way that is far more “knowing” than One is able to comprehend.

For example, in one of the very early scenes, after Miette says she’ll help him find Denree, One mumbles, “Miette...and One...together?” To which she replies, “In your dreams!” Clearly, One is not aware of the implications of his question, but Miette most certainly is. And though One may be innocent sexually, the orphans are very aware of the growing intimacy between One and Miette, and they respond like sexualised beings—resentfully. The little boys, for instance, tell the Octopus that Miette’s disappearance is “all the big guy’s fault.” They tell Miette, scornfully, that One is “a big slobbery fish.” They are suspicious (“What did he do to you?”) and jealous (“You’re inseparable—must be love!”). Miette’s justification for her treatment of One (“He may be big, but he’s not grown-up”) implies that although their relationship may be intimate, there is nothing indecent about it—a notion that would send the Moral Majority into paroxysms. One’s innocence, his lack of self-interest, and his apparent lack of awareness of the sexual nuances in various interchanges with Miette, authorise their affection for one another. The filmmakers support this reading: asked about the sexual connotations of the characters’ exchanges, Jeunet said, “But it’s unconscious on the part of the little girl...and with us too: it was while editing that we realized it.”

While we may (cynically, knowingly) question this avowed “innocence” on the part of the filmmakers, it is important not to read the relationship between One and Miette as a perversion, as that aspect of childhood disenchantment which is most likely to be picked up by the media in the grip of a moral panic. Rather, it is a relationship that is marked by the unconscious, as the filmmakers claim. At the heart of the unconscious is a gap, an uncertainty, the space of unincorporated desire, and this is what marks the relationship between Miette and One. They never speak or fully enact—or, perhaps, really understand—their desire. On the one hand, it isn’t realised; sexual connection is deferred for an unspecified future when Denree will have been recovered; One will have found a house and job and “perhaps, take a wife.” On the other hand, their relationship is more like that of a mature couple than that of perverts/lovers. Miette manages and scolds One; she chases off, with her matronly presence, the hooker whom Marcello has engaged to cheer One up; they curl up side by side on a bed of sacks to keep warm together, but don’t touch in an “inappropriate” way. Their desire, it seems, is to be together, but their sexual engagement remains in the realm of the unconscious and/or the hysterical, not of the pervert.

Slavoj Žižek writes that “the pervert precludes the Unconscious because he knows the answer (to what brings jouissance; to the Other); he has no doubts about it; his position is unshakable; while the hysterical doubts—that is, her position—is that of an eternal and constitutive (self-)questioning: “What does the Other want from me? What am I for the Other?” These are questions the film doesn’t resolve. Miette is child (little sister), wife (organiser), and lover (preening beside him in the mirror); One is her protector, her child, and the object of her desire. And to the question, “What does the Other want from me?” the only possible answer from either Miette or One must be, “I don’t know.”

This “hysterical” logic is played out in a film that never knows quite what we might want of it, or indeed, what it wants of itself. Nonetheless, it offers some shadowy possibilities, mainly through its reversals of logic, value, and principle. In its strongly capitalist milieu, it enacts the internal rupture of capitalism. In its strongly postmodernist orientation, it recuperates an intrinsic and inalienable humanity. Yet despite its essentialist tendencies, it doesn’t seek to restore the dream of childhood innocence, but instead reveals it to be an adult’s, not a child’s,
dream. Adults cannot extract children’s dreams, but only fantasise about the pleasures such dreams might bring—pleasures that are for adults, not children. Why does the film employ this approach? Precisely because the route to reason (and its concomitant values) is to be found not in knowledge of the reality of social existence (that can only produce cynicism, despair and a de facto acceptance of “the way things are”), but, quite the opposite, in being ignorant of that reality. By utilising this naïve and child-like approach, the filmmakers are able, like One, to simply “not recognise” the de facto alienation of the world by the marketplace or the inevitable domination of the logic and values of commoditisation. What they produce is a fairy tale which, in its naïveté and ignorance, opens the way (much as One transforms those around him) circuitously, to a very reasoned critique of the unreason of commoditisation.

NOTES
3. Ibid.

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