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DOGTOOTH: THE FAMILY SYNDROME

MARK FISHER ARGUES THAT YORGOS LANTHIMOS'S FILM POWERFULLY CRITIQUES FAMILY LIFE

When Natascha Kampusch, the Austrian woman who was abducted at the age of ten, sensationally escaped her captivity a few years ago, many were surprised that she showed sympathy for her captor. Some psychologists invoked Stockholm Syndrome, the so-called “coping mechanism” that leads some hostages to identify with their captors, to explain her ambivalence. But Kampusch’s abduction posed a set of uncomfortable questions which the easy invocation of Stockholm Syndrome evades: couldn’t a child’s feelings of sympathy and love toward its parents be the result of just the same psychological mechanisms? What, after all, is the difference between Stockholm Syndrome and the primary socialization undertaken by the family supposed to be? One answer to this might be that, while the family typically produces neurotic normalization (or worse), Stockholm Syndrome can induce a revolutionary subjectivity—a process that Paul Schrader explored in his 1988 film, *Patty Hearst: Her Own Story*, about the heiress turned militant. The concept of Stockholm Syndrome depoliticizes the kind of transformation that Hearst underwent, while simultaneously naturalizing the “ordinary” family.

The shadow of a very abnormal family hangs over Yorgos Lanthimos’s film, *Dogtooth*. It is impossible to watch the film without thinking of the Josef Fritzl case—a parallel that becomes uncanny when you realize that the screenplay was written before the Fritzl story became known to the world. Like Fritzl, the father (Christos Stergiogiou) in *Dogtooth*—neither he, his wife (Michele Valley), nor their three adult children are ever named—keeps his son (Hristos Passalis) and two daughters (Aggeliki Papoulia, Mary Tsoni) totally isolated from the outside world. Their confinement is somewhat less austere than that suffered by Fritzl’s children: the main setting of *Dogtooth* is a large country house with a swimming pool. But, from the point of view of the audience if not of the young characters themselves, the house and its grounds quickly come to seem suffocatingly claustrophobic.

The first scenes are reminiscent of Dennis Potter’s television play *Blue Remembered Hills* from 1979, in which, disconcertingly, adult actors play children. But even though there are all kinds of temptations to read *Dogtooth* allegorically, they are best resisted: these are not adult actors in the roles of children; the strangeness is of another kind. The actors are playing adults who in all respects except physical maturation have not been able to grow up. The actors do a marvelously unsettling job in capturing the semi-autism of children—their only partial mastery of emotional literacy, their sudden bursts of violence, their competitiveness, their unguarded affection—and the disturbing discrepancy between physical and behavioral maturity is a main cause of the constant feeling of unease that *Dogtooth* generates. It also serves as a reminder of the extent to which human child-rearing involves behavior modification.

So far as we can tell, the father’s abuse is limited to physical confinement and psychological control; there is no suggestion of the incestuous assaults committed by the real-life Fritzl. (It is not entirely clear whether the mother is also a victim in some way or simply her husband’s co-conspirator.) It is the father’s initial desire to prevent incest, to see that his son’s sexual needs are in some sense “properly” met, that leads toward the catastrophic disintegration of the closed world. The father pays Christina (Anna Kalaitzidou), the security guard at the factory at which he works in a senior managerial capacity, to have sex with his son—the first of several disturbing sex scenes in the film, which are disquieting precisely because of a lack of either passion or pathology. There is a dutifulness about sex in *Dogtooth*. We might expect Christina to be somewhat detached, but the son also merely goes through the motions. And when, later, we see the father and the mother having intercourse, the act—which the pair perform while listening to a Walkman—is again devoid of any ardor; on another occasion, they watch hardcore pornography in a similarly aseptic fashion. The incestuous scenes which eventually take place between the two daughters have the quality of a childhood game. By this time, the father has decided that no further outside influ-



Walled garden
Dogtooth. Courtesy of Verve Pictures.

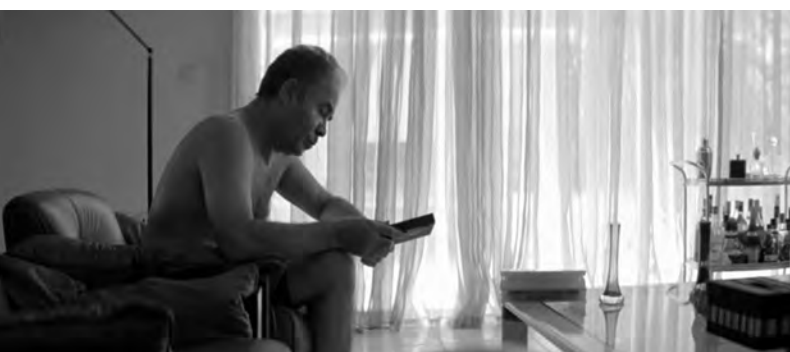
ence can be risked, and, in a chillingly clinical phrase, he tells the mother that he had “been considering assigning the task [of meeting the son’s sexual needs] to the elder one,” before concluding that it would be better if the son seemed to come to this decision himself. The son does so but, once more, the ensuing sex between the siblings lacks any transgressive charge.

While Fritzl was an horrific example of what Jacques Lacan calls *Père Jouissance*, the perverse Father who enjoys without limits, the obscene obverse of the Law, the father in *Dogtooth* is a rather different figure. He is not so much *Père Jouissance* as Papa Dada. Dadaism delighted in exaggerating the pompous absurdity of the ceremonies that authority needs in order to legitimate itself, and Lanthimos’s anatomization of patriarchal power in *Dogtooth* partakes of the same spirit of coldly savage caricature. The father in the film is not the underside of the Law so much as its parodic extension. Everything in the family’s world—from sex to language to the use of mouthwash—becomes subject to a precise ritualized control that becomes all the more ludicrous the more solemnly its arbitrary diktats are observed.

One can only speculate about the father’s motives, since he is never called upon to give an account of them: the children naturally take for granted the bizarre situation in which they find themselves, because they have always lived inside it; while, apart from Christina, the outside world remains

unaware of their predicament. Alone in the family, it is the father who moves between the private and the public world, traveling from his familial despotism to his job in a factory. Unlike someone like serial killer Ed Gein (a psychotic almost entirely detached from any kind of consensual reality), but like Fritzl, the father in *Dogtooth* can move easily between his abuse den of horrors and the public realm of work. The Fritzl case reminds us that the generic distinctions between “realism” and “horror” do not necessarily differentiate the plausible from the impossible; nor do such divisions belong only to cultural modes. Part of what was traumatic about the Fritzl case, in fact, was that it breached the shared social fiction we use to make sense of the world. What erupted here was the obscene proximity of the unthinkable—a proximity not only in physical terms (a house of horrors on an everyday street) but in terms of the structure of the social (incest and murder in the heart of the family).

This is underscored in the tension between *Dogtooth*’s formal naturalism and its (apparently) Dada-like content. The camera lingers impassively, unobtrusively, as if it is performing a merely documentary function. There is neither a score nor any incidental music; all of the music is diegetically embedded. The actors are deadpan, undemonstrative. (At times, there is almost a feeling of reality TV—and after all, in their isolation, in their submission to a cruel and arbitrary regime, what do the children resemble if not *Big*



Papa Dada

Dogtooth. © 2009 Boo Productions/Centre Cinematographique Greque/Yorgos Lanthimos/Horsefly Productions. DVD: Verve Pictures (U.K.).

Brother contestants, nowhere more so than when the father, after having set them a demeaning task, allows the “winner” to choose what the evening’s entertainment will be, especially when that “entertainment” turns out to be watching a video of themselves?)

In *Dogtooth*, only Christina is in a position to question the father, because only she has any inkling of the two worlds that he moves between. But, in her encounters with him, she remains always submissive, the passive object of his exploitation and his enquiries; practically every sentence he speaks to her is a subordinating question: “Are you wearing that perfume I bought for you?” “Did you have a bath?” Rather like an ostensibly conscientious employee who secretly steals stationery, Christina’s acts of subversion take place when the boss cannot see.

After servicing the son, Christina trades a headband for sexual favors from the eldest daughter—but when, on a subsequent visit, Christina attempts to repeat the trade, the daughter is more interested in the videotapes in the security guard’s bag (*Jaws* and *Rocky*). Sensing how dangerous this contraband might be for the constricted interiority that the father has ruthlessly imposed, Christina at first refuses to hand them over, but relents when the eldest daughter blackmails her. In a strange echo of campaigners who lobbied for the banning of so-called “video nasties,” it is the movies which end up destroying the children’s contented insularity rather than their sexual activities. Christina’s sexual experiments and subversions, her asking the eldest daughter to perform cunnilingus, do little to perturb the prelapsarian innocence of the three adult children. Since the genitals

possess no particular erotic or pathological charge for them, no associations of guilt or dirt, the act of licking is easily transferred to another part of the body—when the eldest daughter attempts to copy Christina’s sexual advances, she licks her sister’s shoulder. Unharmful by furtive sexual experimentation, the siblings cannot survive their exposure to *Jaws* and *Rocky*. Previously, the family VCR has been used only for watching home movies: one of the many closed feedback loops which had kept the children locked into obedient participation in the domestic rituals. After the eldest daughter secretly watches the films, she starts to act out scenes and repeat dialogue, its alien idioms soon interrupting the controlled language that the parents have imposed. When the father learns of the transgression, his punishment is brutal and sudden—he fastens one of the video cassettes to his hand and beats the eldest daughter about the head with it. He then visits Christina in her home and, after a moment of banal conversation, he unplugs her VCR from the wall and attacks her with it. Yet there is no returning to the sealed conditions which the films have contaminated. The children had been told that the only time it would be safe for them to leave the house would be when a “dogtooth” (canine) falls out. Perhaps inspired by the violence of *Rocky*, one night the eldest daughter smashes out some of her teeth using a dumb-bell, before hiding in the trunk of her father’s car. She remains undiscovered next morning, and the film ends with a close-up of the trunk—with the suggestion that she may be on the brink of freedom in a world unlike anything she has ever known.

“It’s very striking to see that, as the century draws to a close,” Alain Badiou writes in *The Century* (Polity, 2007), “the family has once more become a consensual and practically unassailable value. The young love the family, in which, moreover, they now dwell until later and later. The German Green Party . . . at one time contemplated calling itself the ‘party of the family’. Even homosexuals . . . nowadays demand insertion within the framework of the family, inheritance and ‘citizenship’” (66). It is possible, despite all the parental cruelty, to read *Dogtooth* as a satire on the sociological tendency of the young to “dwell within the family until later and later.” But the significance of the film, particularly in the decade of Fritzl, is to highlight what Badiou calls the “pathogenic” qualities of the family. For Badiou, the consolidation of the family has been part of a massive restoration of power and authority; instead of debating alternatives to the family as revolutionaries did during the radical moments of the twentieth century, the family has once again assumed a totally dominant ideological position, a position that the actual collapse of the nuclear family in western societies and

the challenges to heterosexual normativity have done little to upset. “The overwhelming majority of child murders are carried out, not by sleazy unmarried paedophiles,” Badiou reminds us, “but by parents, especially mothers. And the overwhelming majority of sexual abuse is incestuous, in this instance courtesy of fathers or stepfathers. But about this, seal your lips! Murderous mothers and incestuous fathers, who are infinitely more widespread than paedophile killers, are an unsettling intrusion into the idyllic portrait of the family, which depicts the delightful relationship between our citizen parents and their angelic offspring” (76).

There is, however, something perversely angelic about the “children” in *Dogtooth*. They appear angelic in part because they can engage in sexual activity without being corrupted by it. They have the state of radical innocence attributed to Adam and Eve before the Fall—they can have sex, but it is of no more significance than scattering seed. (Perhaps the parents’ passionless sex is an attempt to return to this purely functional sexual activity.) “If you stay inside, you are protected,” says the father, echoing the God of Genesis and his warnings about the dangers of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. But the high cost of this protection is evident: “protected” from the traumatic dimensions of sexuality, the children are also deprived of subjectivity and agency; “protected” from outside influence, the family collapses into incestuous involution. From the perspective of the patriarch who has so assiduously preserved the children’s innocence, it is Christina who is the serpent, the bringer of knowledge and therefore of evil. We do not have to accept this contorted logic in order to regard Christina as somewhat cruel. We do now know what the father has told her, and, although Christina is blindfolded when she is taken to the house, she is still able to interact with the three children sufficiently to see that something is seriously amiss here. Whether it is motivated by boredom, malice, or simply a desire to revenge herself on the boss, Christina’s behavior toward the eldest daughter is casually manipulative and not a little callous. She destroys the eldest daughter’s world without assisting her to escape from it.

What disturbed some about Natascha Kampusch was her moral conservatism; soon after her release, she spoke of the benefits of being kept hostage—it meant, she said, that she could not smoke or fall into bad company. “I hope your kids have bad influences and develop bad personalities,” the father spits at Christina, just after he has savagely beaten her. *If you stay inside, you are protected* is the slogan of social conservatism, and it is as if Lanthimos is demonstrating what the ideal conditions for such conservatism would actually need to be. The outside must be totally pathologized:

HOME MOVIE



Dogtooth. © 2009 Boo Productions/Centre Cinematographique Greque/Yorgos Lanthimos/Horsefly Productions. DVD: Verve Pictures (U.K.).

the children have to become literally xenophobic, terrified of everything that lies beyond the limits of their “protected” enclave. *Dogtooth*’s study of the pathogenic family is also, then, a study of the psychology of captivity.

The children are not physically restrained from escaping the house. They are always tentatively testing the limits of their world, throwing objects over the hedges, but until the eldest’s escape attempt, made possible by the forbidden fruit of the videotapes, they are neither able nor willing to step into the outside. What is it that prevents them? *Dogtooth* sometimes plays like the feral cousin of *The Truman Show* (1998), and like Truman (Jim Carrey), the children are kept captive by an elaborate mythology which plays upon their insecurities and anxieties. Reference is repeatedly made to a disappeared brother—did this brother ever exist? Has the father killed him? We are in no position to know, yet the fact that it seems perfectly plausible that a child murder may have taken place suggests how corrupted this weird Eden already is. In one of the most grotesquely comic scenes in the film, the father tears his suit and covers himself in fake blood, before telling the children that this lost brother has been killed by a house cat, “the most dangerous animal there is.” (In an earlier, horrific scene, the son killed a cat which strayed onto the lawn with a pair of pinking shears.) The father, then, is engaged in a kind of ongoing extemporized Dadaist theater, like an inverted version of Guido (Robert Benigni) in *Life Is Beautiful* (1997). Whereas Guido attempts to protect his child by pretending that terrifying threats are just a game, the father in *Dogtooth* converts the mundane stuff of domestic life into something terrifying. The element of absurd theatricality here should not, however, distract us from the extent to which *Dogtooth* presents in an extreme form the ordinary gestures and habits, the storytelling and tricks of discipline, of so-called normal family life.

Control of language is of course crucial to the father’s scheme, and, once again, there is something Dadaist about the way that the two parents manipulate words. But this is a paradoxically familial Dadaism which does violence to the consensually accepted meaning of words not to open up random juxtapositions or the asignifying material-sonorous power of the senseless word itself, but to contain the world within a solipsistic interiority. In the film’s opening scene, the three children listen intently to a cassette player telling them that “a sea is a leather armchair with wooden arms like the one we have in our living room.” Here is the strategy in a nutshell: the outside (the ocean) is always converted into the inside (a leather armchair). The inside can be frightening (pet cats become dangerous predators), but its meaning is

established in advance, fixed by the father and mother’s linguistic micro-despotism, even if sometimes they are forced into improvisations, as in this conversation:

ELDEST DAUGHTER: What’s a pussy?

MOTHER: Where have you seen that word?

ELDEST DAUGHTER: I saw it on a video case, on top of the VCR.

MOTHER: It means a light . . .

There is humor in such exchanges, but it is not of the kind that will provoke much laughter. *Dogtooth*’s funny moments—and there are many of them—instead induce a queasy discomfort that bears some resemblance to the humor analyzed by Adam Kotsko in his book, *Awkwardness* (Zero Books, 2010). But where the comedy that Kotsko describes—in the films of Judd Apatow, or the television series *The Office* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*—ought only to produce squirms of embarrassment but ends up making us laugh, the scenes in *Dogtooth* solicit uneasy half-smiles at best. Toward the end of the film, we see the children perform a routine for their parents; the son plays acoustic guitar while the daughters dance. The son can actually play pretty competently, but the daughters’ dancing is painfully gauche. They shuffle out of time like TV talent-show contestants whose performance is only broadcast to invite ridicule; they move like aliens who are familiar with the concept of dancing but have never actually seen it done; they throw themselves about like rag dolls, then the elder daughter—who could be reenacting scenes from *Rocky*—starts running on the spot. It is as unbearable as the famous Ricky Gervais dancing scene from *The Office*, but we are denied the release of laughter: the abusive situation and the genuinely pathetic quality of the two daughters prevent it. Besides, we are denied any point of identification, denied anyone on screen who could laugh with us—or whom we would want to share our laughter with. We move instead toward the profoundly discomfiting comedy of someone like Todd Solondz, before, mercifully, the mother says, “enough.”

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ABSTRACT An analysis of Yorgos Lanthimos’s *Dogtooth*, in which parents create a totally insular, weirdly theatrical, and sometimes brutal world for their children. To what extent does this blackly comic, almost Dadaist horror show reveal wider truths about what Badiou calls today’s “pathogenic” families?

KEYWORDS *Dogtooth*, Yorgos Lanthimos, cinema and family, horror, psychoanalysis and cinema