Initiating Children in Language and World: Learning from *Dogtooth*

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INTRODUCTION

We present here an account of how the depiction of childrearing in the film *Dogtooth*[1] is allegorical of how we protect children from, and initiate children in to, the world. The film undeniably invites a political reading, or otherwise explanatory account, due to its many disarming, weird, and straightforwardly shocking scenes. Such as reading is not our aim. Drawing on Stanley Cavell's account of initiation as an expression of what we do when we "teach" children about the world, we focus on the very particular vision of language presented in the film. Our account aims to underscore the need for educational-philosophical analyses of *upbringing* as a way to respond to the recasting of those relationships and practices as "parenting." The film asserts, albeit in a paradoxical way, something about raising children that goes unnoticed in the predominant discourse of "parenting."

Dogtooth depicts a Greek family – mother, father, son, and two daughters. The children are in their late teens, the son perhaps in his early twenties. The father is an administrator in a factory, the mother stays at home with the children, where they receive their education and are set tasks to complete and games to play, usually outside in the large garden, where there is also a pool. When the father comes home, bringing any supplies they need, the family eat together, then perhaps watch a film or

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listen to music. The house is clean, and the children are healthy, articulate, and well-behaved.

But this, apparently, is where any similarities between this family and what we understand to be a healthy family, or good parenting, end. The members of this family do not have names, but are referred to relationally (Father, Mother, the Oldest, the Middle One, the Youngest). The children and Mother never leave the confines of the house and garden. Only Father leaves, to go to work, and only ever by car. The supplies he brings back always have the labels removed. The only other person who comes to the house – Christina, a security guard at Father's factory – comes by car with him, blindfolded for the entire journey. She comes only to have sex with the son (the Oldest) for which she is paid by Father when they get back in the car. When she can no longer visit, the son's sexual needs are taken care of incestuously, by the Oldest. When the family watches a film together, it is a home video of themselves. We see them listening to music, a Frank Sinatra record. But Father gives a simultaneous translation that is, intentionally, completely off-track. The parents give the children a "false" account of the world: they give the impression that fish come into being out of nothing, and that Mother can give birth to a dog. The children are taught that the world beyond the fence is extremely dangerous and should only be entered by car. They are also taught that one is not ready to leave home until the dogtooth falls out; they are not told that this particular tooth does not normally fall out at that stage of one's life (and so have no sense that, on this logic, they will never (be ready to) leave). Perhaps most conspicuously, when the parents teach their children new words, they give definitions far removed from these words' ordinary use. "Zombie" is a little yellow flower, "pussy" (vagina) is a big light, a cat is the most dangerous animal there is, etc.

It is this teaching and learning of words (and the world it con-

stitutes) that is our specific focus here. In *Dogtooth*, language functions as "the medium through which the filmmaker captivates the most ordinary aspects of human behavior, so as to dissect them and analyze them."[2] One of these "most ordinary aspects" is our initiating children into the world through language. The peculiar use of language in *Dogtooth*, we argue, exposes something of our relationship to language and to our children that goes unnoticed in today's predominant recasting of this relationship in terms of "parenting."

LEARNING A LANGUAGE: DOMESTICATION

The film's depiction of the children's isolation, and its many scenes that are "weird," shocking, or that transgress accepted meanings and norms, raise the expectation that some kind of interpretation is needed to "make sense" of them. Commentators and scholars have often, understandably, looked for a symbolic explanation of the way language is used to misinform the children, and have read the film in critical terms as revealing truths about the contemporary Greek family or society, about patriarchy or repressive social structures.[3] Undeniably, the film invites such interpretations. But here we focus on what the film shows us about the intergenerational relationship we call upbringing, which, if read in these ethical, socio-political etc. terms, risks being overdetermined in advance.

The film presents numerous instances of the teaching and learning of language.[4] The first scene shows a close-up of a small tape recorder. We hear Mother's voice:

> Today the new words are the following: Sea, motorway, excursion, carbine. A sea is a leather armchair with wooden arms, like one we have in our living room. For example: Don't stand on your feet. Sit on the sea to

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> have a quiet chat with me. A motorway is a very strong wind. An excursion is a very resistant material used to construct floors. For example: the chandelier fell violently on to the floor but no damage was caused to it because it is made of 100% excursion. Carbine. A carbine is a beautiful white bird.

This immediately sets the tone for much of the use of language in the film. Despite the odd significations (plain wrong, from the viewer's perspective), the scene does bear characteristics of a formal teaching situation. There is an economy of meaning at work typical of, especially, early education, and of how we respond to young children's questions in "age-appropriate" ways: clear instruction, precision of definition, provision of an illustrative example. To give another example: at dinner one evening, the Oldest asks "What's a pussy?" Slightly perturbed, Mother asks, "Where did you see this word?" The daughter replies that she read it from the video case on top of the television. The parents watched a pornographic film the previous night and had (uncharacteristically) left the video case out. Quickly, the mother finds an answer: "It is a big light." And, as with the new words on the audio cassette, she provides an example to show how the word is used in context.

The misinformation is obvious. But, we argue, this is not the most interesting aspect of this teaching, from an educational-philosophical perspective. To stress that the children are misinformed, or wrongly educated, would invite discussion about the distinction between education and indoctrination. This might lead to the remarkable observation that, following Cavell, "we still do not have convincing accounts of the difference between education and indoctrination, and do not know on what basis we wish, for example, to shield children from movies, and, more intensely, television, more carefully than from, say, Richard III or

Macbeth."[5] But this is not the direction we pursue here; in an important sense, to do so would not take seriously what *is* going on between the parents and the children. To read the film's language in terms of what is mistranslated does make sense, *but only to us as viewers;* we can compare what the parents in *Dogtooth* are doing with what ordinary parents do. But for the children, no such misinformation is taking place. For them, importantly, the words *cannot* mean just anything else.[6] Words, the parents show, have one, and only one, clear meaning; there is no ambiguity. As their use of home video and translated music illustrates, the parents scrupulously ensure that words can only mean as they define them (just as we would say that *that* is a kitten, and not a rabbit).

There is a certain domestication at work here: in the sense that something from the outside (which is dangerous and bears the mark of being forbidden) is incorporated into the inside, the domestic; in the very way words (apart from their specific meaning) are allowed to be used; and in the particular tone with which they speak to one another, as if language is stripped of the liveliness of ordinary conversation. Conversation is direct, exact, non-ambiguous. For example: in the car, Father is engaging Christina in conversation. But "conversation" here requires a direct answer to a question. Father asks, "What is your favorite song?" "I have two," she responds. The father does not ask what they are. Such an ambiguous answer doesn't fit the structure of the exchange. So Father initiates an exchange on a different subject.

LEARNING A LANGUAGE: INITIATION

As Cavell states, there is something "wrong with thinking of learning language as being taught or told the names of things."[7] Much more than this, Cavell suggests, learning a language is initiation into a form of life: "Instead, then, of saying either that we *tell* beginners what words

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mean, or that we *teach* them what objects are, I will say: we initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world."[8] We elaborate on this in two points: (1) language constitutes a world; (2) initiation is not determinant.

World constitution

The teaching of (incorrect) vocabulary does not exist in isolation but is constitutive of the kind of world that starts to exist for the initiate.[9] What is at stake in initiation is the constitution of a particular ontology. Cavell gives the example of his daughter who, in the process of learning the word "kitty," makes a "mistake" and says kitty when stroking a fur piece. The "mistake" points to the relationship between language and world constitution:

> I have wanted to say: Kittens – what we call "kittens" – do not exist in her world yet, she has not acquired the forms of life which contain them. They do not exist in something like the way cities and mayors will not exist in her world until long after pumpkins and kittens do; or like the way God or love or responsibility or beauty do not exist in our world … [10]

In a very basic sense, this is what is going on in upbringing; a world gradually comes about for children. The implications of this are far-reaching; the way this implicates educators, quite frightening:

> When you say "I love my love" the child learns the meaning of the word "love" and what love is. That (what you do) will be love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when

> love is sought that will be sought. When you say "I'll take you tomorrow, I promise," the child begins to learn what temporal durations are, and what trust is, and what you do will show what trust is worth. When you say "Put on your sweater," the child learns what commands are and what authority is, and if giving orders is something that creates anxiety for you, then authorities are anxious, authority itself uncertain.[11]

Unsettling as this may be, this is also what is going on in *Dogtooth*. That initiation is constitutive is seen in the film in the way that the outside world is described and, therefore, imagined in their form of life. The following example shows two aspects of their ontology.

First, the domestication of everything visible that, therefore, requires explanation, or definition. An aeroplane flies over the house. The Youngest says, "I wish it would fall." The Middle One replies, "If it does, I'll get it." Swiftly, Mother slaps her across the cheek: "Whoever deserves it will get it." Later, the children are in the garden. A plane is approaching. Unseen by the children, Mother steps outside and signals to Father that she has a small toy aeroplane. As the plane overhead nears, the father exclaims, "Ah, an aeroplane!" Mother then throws the toy onto the lawn. "It fell in to the garden," Father says. The children run to claim it. They have no grounds on which to think that this is anything other than the plane they just saw in the sky.

A second aspect of their ontology is shown in the mother's reproach; the idea that the one who gets the plane is the one who deserves it means: the one who claims it is the one who tried hardest to get it and so, on that basis, deserves it. If Mother decided who deserved it, this would be a subjective decision, open to contestation and counter-argument, which would introduce an imbalance in family relations: jealousy,

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resentment, etc. But here, the strict economy of language and reason into which the children have been initiated is maintained.

Initiation is not determinant

Initiation doesn't *determine* what the initiate says and does. The educator does not control the limits of what is "taught": "Teaching" in this sense means "'showing them what we say and do,' and 'accepting what they say and do as what we say and do,' etc.; and this will be more than we know, or can say."[12] In *Dogtooth*, it is this "more" that the parents close down; any "more" (e.g. asking what a "pussy" is) is domesticated ("It means a large light") or given a name of something they will never encounter (e.g. "zombie").[13] Any potential for slippage or ambiguity is closed down.

We see this again when the children discuss playing a game. After they have listened to the new words on the cassette, the Youngest suggests a game of endurance: simply, let's see who can hold their finger in hot water for longest. The scene involves the setting and clarification of rules, and an apparent fixation on their being "watertight," so to speak. That we never see the game played perhaps hints at an aversion to things that contain too many ambiguities to sew up. The fixity of meaning, in the tape-recorded lesson and throughout the film, does not imply a general lack of language *per se*. When deciding the rules of the game and in their general exchanges, they have an ability to reason and raise questions; they read (medical textbooks particularly for the Youngest). But the world to which they apply that language is one in which all risk and ambiguity are removed, or in which conversation functions to achieve this, to maintain the exchange value of words and actions within the *oikos*.

But it is precisely this ambiguity, Cavell stresses, that is so crucial –

indeed, internal – to initiation: we cannot "*limit* words to *certain* contexts" and "coin new ones for new eventualities" due to "the fierce ambiguity of ordinary language;" apart from in very specific contexts, we cannot "get words *pinned* to a meaning." [14] Part of Wittgenstein's vision of (the learning of) language, Cavell contends, is that "the learning is never over;" "we keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed. The 'routes of initiation' are never closed."[15] This also implies that it is not necessarily, or always, clear who can claim authority for saying this or that is the case or, specifically, who can claim authority for saying this or that projection of a word into a new context (a "novel" use of a word) is correct, acceptable, appropriate, reprehensible, etc.[16]

SCENE(S) OF INSTRUCTION

To pursue this question of authority, we contrast the film's scenes of instruction (illustrated in the foregoing examples), with what Cavell calls Wittgenstein's "scene of instruction:"[17] "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"[18] For Cavell this is a pedagogical scene *par excellence*, capturing the moment when the educator has come to the end of possible explanations. But this scene can be taken to imply that the focus in initiation is on "preservation" (of what parents find important). Raising children would then be something like passing on the world as it is, having it reproduced – as if what children do is just take over or adopt, as in "copy," what parents do and say. If taken in this way, "This is simply what I do" becomes "a show of power … speaking for the community and its settlements, demanding agreement, threatening exclusion, as if the subtext of the demonstration is: Do it my way or suffer the consequences."[19] It is this gesture of authority that is shown throughout the film: in the vision of language depicted, the need

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for justification never arises. The explanation is its own justification in this closed economy of language.

But Cavell reads that passage differently:

> I have taken the gesture rather oppositely, as acknowledging a necessary weakness, I might call it acknowledging separateness, in teaching (or socialization), stressing that the arrival at an impasse between teacher and pupil also threatens, and may enlighten, the teacher.[20]

On this reading, the educator is not presenting herself as a figure of authority, claiming mastery over present and future uses of words. Rather, hers is a gesture of exposition, which questions (rather than affirms) her representativeness of the world and the world itself. The criticism that the concept of initiation is conservative or deterministic can now be dispensed with, as Cavell brings out: it is in the very act of "taking over," or "adopting," itself that an essential aspect of the pedagogical relationship is enacted. Cavell emphasizes that the child must at some point *want* to take over what we are initiating her into.[21] The anxiety in initiation is that others (our children) might no longer find it worth their while to do so:

> … whether our words will go on meaning what they do depends upon whether other people find it worth their while to continue to understand us – that, seeing a better bargain elsewhere they might decide that we are no longer of their world; as though our sanity depended upon their approval of us, finding us to their liking.[22]

We take this passage to express a deep truth about raising children: the vulnerability of the educator. It expresses that the educator does not have under control what the world means, that she cannot lay claim to it; the "teaching" that takes place when we initiate children "will be more than

we know, or can say." As parents, we do not have control over the continuance of the world we find valuable to pass on. All that seems to be within our control is that we can share this world with our children; we can only invite our children to take part in, to become part of, our world.

But the children's initiation into language in *Dogtooth* allows for no excess; no "more" is permitted. In the constitution of an ontology in the film, their world is enclosed upon itself; the outside can either be incorporated (like the aeroplane) or must be kept out (like cats). Everything that is encountered is fully accounted for. By pinning down language, the parents are seen to block out what Cavell terms "the fierce ambiguity of ordinary language."[23] In being denied this fierce ambiguity in ordinary language, and so too the experience of "finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are disclosed,"[24] the children are condemned to literally follow what is stipulated in the definitions, limited to certain contexts. Alternative routes are not imaginable.

Cracks in the regime appear through the figure of Christina. Father tries to regulate and fix the meaning and purpose of her interventions. But the very possibility of ambiguity arises when Christina introduces other things (e.g. a headband) and other concepts (e.g. that the rhinestones on the headband sparkle without electricity), and becomes an additional agent in the economy (trading the headband for being licked). It is not the economic exchange that she introduces that is important as such; this is understood within the closed economy of the household (e.g. the one who deserves the plane will get it; stickers are given as rewards for good performance at tasks). Rather, she introduces meanings that cannot be contained within the economy: films. *Jaws*, *Flashdance*, and *Rocky*. But even then, the children's instruction turns back upon them. Its authoritative nature - "Do it my way or suffer the consequences" - overpowers them: the children are only seen to literally execute what has been introduced.

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The boxing in *Rocky*, e.g., we can assume, doesn't exist in the Oldest's form of life. Its on-screen action is taken literally and we see her punching herself in the face repeatedly.

We see something similar in the closing parts of the film. Once the ambiguity has been introduced by Christina, it demands a response, which is both a way out and also (necessarily) a repinning of meaning: making true the truth of the "dogtooth." The only way out is to literally execute one of the pinned meanings: the Oldest has her dogtooth fall out.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary culture of parenting has been criticized for being in the grip of a scientization.[25] Parents are expected to see themselves as learning subjects, who must continuously update their knowledge (provided by the "psy" disciplines) and skills in order to properly raise their children. The parent-child relationship is thereby privatized; it becomes a matter of the optimization of individual developmental and learning outcomes. The scientific account of parenting defines and restricts how we think and talk about upbringing. Where concern for the world is expressed, it is in instrumental terms: the outcome of particular investments; the need for preventative strategies (e.g. better children, better citizens, better world). It is against this predominant understanding of parenting today that we see the untimely relevance of *Dogtooth*.

Within the "parenting" culture, the dominant discourse presents the world as getting ever more complicated, beyond the purview of parents; there are numerous (and increasing) threats to their child's development (i.e., chances of becoming a successful adult). But for each new danger there is a new expert with strategies to help us deal with that scary world. In a sense, of course, this is human-all-too-human; most

parents are, at times, to varying degrees, overcome by a sense of anxiety. It is inherent to the very experience of being a parent, and sometimes can lead to being overly concerned or overly controlling. But in general, parents "monitoring" the "inside world" (out of a fear for the outside world) pervades most of the stages of upbringing. As parents, we always "translate" the events of the outside world in ways we deem suitable for our children; as parents we feel a need to control what it is of the world that reaches our children (socially, textually, or digitally).

One feels inclined to say that raising children is full of risks, because there are so many potential impediments to optimal development to be aware of. But this is not the sense we want to bring out on the basis of our reading of *Dogtooth*. Our analysis suggests that upbringing is risky because in it the (meaning of the) world is at stake. If, for some reason, someone (especially our children) no longer finds it to her liking to allow the world to mean what we think and say it means, this reaches to the very heart of our existence. In the contemporary parenting culture, concerned with drawing attention to dangers and assuaging parents' fears through new expertise, there is a focus on the child's resilience, self-esteem, psychological health, emotional wellbeing, etc. Against this background, a good parent is one who is able to successfully navigate the "generosity of expertise,"[26] *knows* what to do (e.g. to develop a child's self-esteem), and is willing to continuously learn and adapt her strategies in pursuit of such goals. But what is at stake in the parent-child relationship, as Cavell suggests, may not in the first instance be our child's "sanity." Rather, as the peculiar use of language in the film shows, in initiation, it is our own sanity that is at stake. *Dogtooth* may show an extreme allegorization of the risk-averse parenting culture and the need to protect against all possible infringements, but for this reason it is also uncannily revealing: it is not our children who are incapable of dealing with the world, but us, parents, who do not know how to relate to that world anymore.

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1 Yorgos Lanthimos, *Dogtooth* (2009); http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1379182/.

2 Angelos Koutsourakis, "Cinema of the body: The politics of performativity in Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* and Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*," *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 3 (2012): 84-108, 96. Koutsourakis' own argument pertains to the actors' bodies being that medium. We think his insightful argument also "applies" to Lanthimos' use of language.

3 E.g. John DeFore, "Dogtooth," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 15 (2010): 415; Dan Georgakas, "Dogtooth," *Cineaste* 35, no. 3 (2010): 48-49; Stamos Metzidakis, "No bones to pick with Lanthimos' film Dogtooth," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies 32*, no. 2 (2014): 367-392.

4 See also Metzidakis, "No bones to pick"; Florelle D'Hoest, "Exploring educational potentiality. Three stories from the film Dogtooth," in *Afterschool. Images, Education and research*, eds. Nancy Vansieleghem, Joris Vlieghe, and Pieter Verstraete (Leuven: Leuven University Press: 2015), 111-124.

5 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of words. Pedagogical Letters on a register of the moral life* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 335.

6 Eugenie Brinkema argues that "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" in *Dogtooth*, and that this is where its "logic of violence" is located. But this only holds for someone viewing from outside, and able to see a distinction between "normal" and "unusual" uses of words; so not for the children. Cf. Eugenie Brinkema, "e.g., Dogtooth," *World Picture 7*, Autumn (2012): 1-26, 3. http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_7/Brinkema.html

7 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 173.

8 Ibid., 178.

9 Cf. ibid., 172ff; cf. also Luc Van den Berge, "How scientific frameworks 'frame parents': Wittgenstein on the import of changing language-games," in *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education*, eds. Michael Peters and Jeff Stickney (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017).

10 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 172.

11 Ibid., 173.

12 Ibid., 178.

13 In this sense, the picture of language in *Dogtooth*, maintained by the parents, approaches Augustine's 'picture' of language that Wittgenstein discusses in the opening pages of his *Philosophical Investigations*. For reasons of space, we cannot develop this here.

14 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 180.

15 Ibid.

16 Cf. ibid.

17 Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 71; Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 112.

18 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), I, #217.

19 Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 113. Cavell also argues there that this is how Saul Kripke (mis)reads this passage.

20 Ibid.

21 Cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 178.

22 Ibid., 179.

23 Ibid., 180.

24 Ibid.

25 Cf. e.g. Ellie Lee, Jenny Bristow, Charlotte Faircloth, and Jan Macvarish, *Parenting Culture Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

26 Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 92.

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