

## **The uses of attachment: Some reflections on Robbie Duschinsky's 'A grimace of fear or anger in the context of contended play: Filming disorganised attachment'<sup>1</sup>**

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In a lecture given more than a hundred years ago, William James said: "There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere -no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen" (2000, p. 27). It is under these words that I want to think about the uses of attachment, and under that scope I think that Robbie's presentation today represents a valuable and welcome work.

Talking about 'attachment' has become, somehow, easy. That does not mean it is not important, or that everything has been said about it. On the contrary, the danger entailed by notions with the history, trajectories and effects like those of 'attachment' is a kind of double reification. First, there are the uses of attachment that Robbie's argument stresses the most: those fuelled by what he called 'desires for the real' (Duschinsky, 2014) and that elicit a contingent alliance between psychology, the neurosciences and many times politics or childhood-related intervention disciplines. This coalition may identify attachment with the 'cause' of a series of (mis)behaviours. The dream of a straightforward, single –and why not- comfortable explanation of the complex through the simple lives again. Thus, a 'disorganised/disoriented' attachment bond becomes a certainty that authorizes our interventions and thought to deploy a series of equivalences that create and stabilize a certain object of intervention.

Curiously, those working with children, especially in clinical or institutional settings, may recognise this particular reified use of attachment in the claims about childhood held by scientists or practitioners whose proximity to the concrete empirical problems that gave rise to Bowlby's et al observations is not obvious. It is important to spend some time in the kind of things that are actually being said about attachment today. What is at stake is not so much what attachment 'is' but how it is being used. Here is an example: "when children have not enjoyed a secure attachment they have difficulties in developing satisfactory affective bonds, they use to be violent, they present a bad relationship with the figures of authority, they do not adjust themselves to rules and have bad relations with their parents. Later, when they are grownups, many times they end up being despotic, and they run the risk of falling into delinquency and drug addiction". Further ahead the interviewee goes on to say: "It is reasonable to conclude that emotional behaviour is not determined by the genes, even though the temperament is the most hereditary thing we have, since the genetic expression of our emotionality can be moulded and altered by our lived experiences. In other words, a good attachment can help to avoid the expression of those genes linked to the individual's vulnerability"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented as a response to Robbie Duschinsky's presentation at the Unit of Play's seminar 'Interpreting a Grimace of Fear in the Context of Play: between Bowlby and Deleuze'. Goldsmiths, University of London, 11 February 2014.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uchile.cl/noticias/47717/apego-y-experiencia-temprana-el-descubrimiento-de-los-primeros-anos>, translation is mine.

These words were said by a medical doctor from the Human Genetics Programme from the Institute of Biomedical Sciences of the University of Chile. It is an interview, given as a way of promoting a graduate diploma in “Attachment and early experience: the discovery of the early years”. It is, I think, an exemplary use of attachment as a way of slashing through causal heterogeneity and –like Robbie (2014) says, drawing on Deleuze- a worrying use of attachment as a conceptualisation whose main possibility -and problem- is to hurriedly hide and close the forces at play between the objects and bodies that circulate through fields of interest as different as child behaviour, delinquency, human genetics, alterity, law, and so on. This is a worrying use because it deploys attachment as a predictor and single causal explanation, the one that produces grimaces of fear, anger or satisfaction in the stakeholders and activists in charge of defining and intervening the child-adult relation and its translations into care and policy. This reductive use is precisely what gives attachment some of its power to polemicize with other ‘theories’ and to claim an upper-hand over other attempts to explain infancy, the origins and destinies of personhood, or even love.

Let us consider another example. About attachment, again, we can read: “the construction of a secure bond between the baby and her caregivers is, without a doubt, a protective factor for the baby, which promotes her autonomy, emotional development, identity and self-esteem, providing her with the bases to face future life in a better way. Thus, secure-attachment promotion and prevention during early infancy are of special relevance, together with the fact that the first years of life constitute a critical period that might turn out to be of great vulnerability in relation to psychosocial stress”<sup>3</sup>. This is the description of another graduate diploma, this time in “Secure attachment promotion: an interdisciplinary approach to the construction of the first bond”. If in the first quotes we had the maledictions of ‘bad’ attachment, here we have the promises of ‘good’ attachment: from development to identity, from organism to society. Through an opening of possibilities and ruins, attachment thus becomes something like the foundation of a worldview, and secure or disorganized/disoriented bonds the departing point from which a distribution of roles, actions, responsibilities, values, and relations to past, present and future, emerge. Virtuous and wicked caregivers are delineated, good and bad relationships are sketched, desirable and avoidable ways of life are prescribed and, eventually, a certain amalgamation of past and present of biology and environment become the decisive point where the future is decided. This despite lukewarm efforts, that began with Bowlby (1979) himself, to provide a more nuanced picture through the exchange of concepts such as “critical phase of development” for that of “sensitive phase of development” when locating the “when does it happen” and “which are the consequences” of attachment<sup>4</sup>.

Probably, nothing of what I say surprises you; as I said earlier, there is a lot being said about attachment today, its goods and evils. Robbie traces the logic of this reification well, and faces us with some of the uses of attachment as an artefact, sustained by mischaracterisations of Bowlby, Ainsworth and Main’s work, an appeal to observation and the use of film technologies-as-

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.educacioncontinua.uc.cl/13588-ficha-diplomado-en-promocion-de-apego-seguro-enfoque-interdisciplinario-en-la->, translation is mine.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., for example, his 1957 lecture ‘An ethological approach to research in child development’ (Bowlby, 1979).

laboratory-like proof, and the authority of that which is hard-wired into our species, being therefore “really real”<sup>5</sup>.

We are also aware of the conservative drive that puts the idea of attachment into motion when justifying policy, institutional interventions and clinical practice –from hospitals to jails, from child-protection services to schools- one that states that things “are” and that it is our life-work to adapt ourselves to them, that divergence is deviance, that children are adults-in-the-making and thus, we have to supervise them, watch over the “correct” development of their capacities, act like the stick that gives shape to that little plant that is growing in the wrong direction. From there we are only a step away from the authorization for surveillance of children “at risk”, the separation of children from their parents (because they are vulnerable, the ‘familial system’ presents risk factors, and because they probably had non-secure bonds of attachment too), the criminalisation of behaviours of fear and anger –which are made to act as both cause and explanation-, the over-policing of pregnancy, motherhood, certain kinds of class experiences of parenting, etc.

We know this, we learned this lesson from authors like Donzelot (1979) who convincingly alerted us that whenever we found a modern interest in children, we should be looking for how this interest acted as means for something else. It makes sense, and we are aware of the ways in which attachment, as an emissary of the ever-policing psy-disciplines, plays its part in creating and legitimising a network of points of passage and relief that enacts a complex of knowledges, institutions, normalisation procedures, and governing of infants, mothers, families and beyond (for three very different examples cf. Burman, 2008 esp. ch. 7; Illouz, 2007, esp. parts 1 and 2; Rose, 1989, esp. part 3)

We know well how this works when it comes to attachment: it mobilises psychology, neurosciences, policy-making, clinical practice, film-making, academic training, criminology, and so on, in a reduction of the real. This effort, that we could characterise with William James (1956) as a passion for simplification, disavows the ‘many’ of the socio-material pluralities that we identify under names such as ‘childhood’, ‘nurturing’, ‘family’ and so on, and subsumes them under the ‘one’ of single cause and effect. If we borrow Steve Brown’s (2010) concerns about a different issue, we could say that this reification is put into motion when children become a ‘social problem’, that is to say, a problem for others, and attachment acts *not as a resolution or a proper explanation but as a settlement* to the concerns of those involved with children and their becoming-adults. Attachment as a way to code the “flows of love, learning and finance” (Brown, p. 104) that envelop them, rejecting the overdetermined nature of the ‘objects’ that, at least, the social sciences supposedly try to tackle. It is in this line that, I think, Robbie calls our attention to note that “the vivid and deep representation of reality offered by film supported a ‘desire for the real’ tinted by essentialism, reinforcing the more general tendency in psychology to treat behaviours in a group as occurring through an unitary and undifferentiated process” (Duschinsky, 2014, pp. 8-9).

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to think about the many impacts that the significance that the idea of making the ‘psychological’ visible in film might have had for Bowlby, especially considering his concerns about the scientific status of psychoanalysis. In relation to this, his consideration of Popper’s normative demands for testable hypotheses (Bowlby, 1969) is as suggesting as his interest in psychoanalysis as a ‘rational way of helping’ (1979, p. 17).

But, what can we say about that other operation that immediately turns attachment into something –a thing too, perhaps- to denounce as something bad? The critical work of deconstructing and exposing the interests behind the uses of attachment also risks a more subtle, insidious form of reification. Here I think it is important to make a distinction: The contributions from feminism, the new social studies of childhood, critical psychology, and so on have –as I described before- significantly enriched the debate showing that, far from a detached description of a set of facts of our lives as mammals, this strangely atheoretical-theoretical concept has a history in the dispute over the authority to define what lives –human and other- are or should be.

However, the danger of a second form of reification rises when attachment immediately equals bad, when we just have to exercise the cleverness of showing how, why, and for whom it is wrong. In sum, when we pick up the book, read the article, talk to the activist, and already know not only the ending, but probably the plot too. This is the risk of redundancy, which echoes in Isabelle Stengers' rather bitter words in relation to our avoidance of "a confrontation with the messy world of practices through clean conceptual dilemma or eliminativist judgements". This evasion, she says, leaves us "with a theatre of concepts of power of which, to understand retroactively, is matched only by the powerlessness to transform" (2011a, p. 380). I do not think, however, that the critical denunciation of Bowlby's concept has been powerless –it is just a matter of remembering that in 1962 the WHO issued a reassessment (Ainsworth et al, 1962) of Bowlby's original ideas published in 1951 (Bowlby, 1995, [1951]) probably with an eye in the political implications of their suggestion that infants and young children *had* to experience an intimate and continuous relationship with their mothers or mother-figures to function 'normally'.

But, should the 'eliminativist' powers of attachment and the infamous disorganised/disoriented behaviour, be confronted exclusively with the dismantling of attachment via the acute use of the categories of power, knowledge, performativity, and so on? This is something that can be done, as the demolition of the psy disciplines since the 70s at the hands of different forms of critical thought proves. In their political and emancipatory commitments, these have been efforts that without a doubt nurtured the worlds where something was being done in the name of the psy disciplines. However, things become less interesting when we pay attention to the fascination that ran parallel to those obligations, a captivation with the elegance and economy of a form of critique that vanished all the conceptual, methodological, and worldly ventures of the psy disciplines as smokescreens that covered the real affairs of human power. The seduction of cleverly speaking in the name of others, of what 'really' happens to them is indeed one of the risks of the social sciences (Stengers, 2011b).

Here, the work of Robbie is, again, very welcomed. I think that his arguments make talking about attachment harder. They postpone the idea that we have all that we need to know on the table. Instead of following along the inertia of the metonymic movement –that turns Bowlby into Ainsworth, Ainsworth into Main, all of them into their readers, their readers into those in charge of translating idea into intervention- he unravelled differences and (mis)matches. He reintroduced the textures that travelled along with the concept, resisting to throw away the baby of the actual creative potentials of film technologies –good and bad- with the bathwater of their use in the authoritative rhetoric of evident fact.

It would be interesting to ask Robbie to expand about the reasons for his turn towards Deleuze. First, in relation to his use of the distinction of movement-image versus time-image that allows him to establish a difference between Main's *theory* refusal to go beyond the conflicts between

attachment and fear, and to read *Ainsworth's film assisted procedures (or is it the film material?) of the strange situation* as time-image, since they allow and elicit a dynamic, unstable world where the irreconcilable gets a chance.

Secondly, Robbie's work with Deleuze and Spinoza throws light on a possible attempt to recreate or rethink the 'subject' of attachment as playing machines of desire and movement, while infants –which do not necessarily coincide with the (collective) subject(s) individuated by attachment- are considered to be suspended between the oscillating movements of attachment and adventure.

Much more could be said, and hopefully his work can lead to experiment with a different kind of attentiveness in relation to attachment's co-production in the midst of a socio-material milieu where infants and the caregivers are always decentred, between the threats of deterritorialisation and the costly securities of territorialisation, where play, movement, proximity and separation turn into film, film into codes, and codes into truths. Play, that transitional instance where psychoanalysis has located a space of libidinal exercise, that libido that –as Deleuze (1998) claims- flows enveloping landscapes, continents, populations, stories and geographies through which children get attached and explore creating maps of trajectories, forces and people. Would remembering that Bowlby (1979) spoke of "libidinal demands" before changing his vocabulary to "need for secure attachment" spark our curiosity, our theoretical, methodological, desire to play with his and his colleague's work?

A possible gift of Robbie's paper to our desires for academic play is to envisage attachment as something more complex, where its transformation from the clinic to film, and then to protocols and practices of research and intervention is turned into a problem. Not just a description: a proper work of translation, a re-engagement with the 'that', 'how' and 'what' of those collected in the name of attachment. Particularly, perhaps, children, and 'children' experience, that experience that has been equally reified, colonised, even trivialised, at the junction of observation, concept, and the 'fallacy of testimony'. A chance for another form of existence, one that is not simply an epiphenomenon of a trait of the species, but neither a mere correlate of regimes of knowledge and power<sup>6</sup>. After all, we might be interested in thinking that in the uses of attachment we can once again hear the echoes of some of James' words: "The really vital question for us all is, what is this world going to be? What is life eventually make of itself?" (2000, p. 57).

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<sup>6</sup> As even Deleuze (1988, p. 109), perhaps commenting on Foucault's archaeology, perhaps writing about his own convictions, was once tempted to suggest.

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