

"ONLY A MOTHER'S LOVE"

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Working with street children, gangsters and thieves, I've had ample opportunity to see any number of tattoos.¹ Among all of the words and images that young people choose to inscribe on their bodies, I have noticed one common thread among Crips and Bloods in New York, sicarios in Medellín, and gang members in Brazil. One message stands out among all of the rest, perhaps best expressed in a tattoo I saw in Recife last year: "Amor só de mãe:" only a mother's love.²

Most essays on crime and violence try to use academic knowledge to solve the problems of the inner city or the shantytown, but here I want to do exactly the opposite. When we put the phrase "Only a mother's love" in dialogue with Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, in fact it is gangsters who have something to teach the academy... and the broader society. In their thought about mothers and love, they have discovered an important way out of postmodern violence.

Last August, during a workshop in Argentina, I taught a young man – once a street kid and petty thief – how to make documentary films. As the central symbol of his film, Alejandro chose the passage through the sewers under the city of Córdoba, where he and his friends always fled "after we swiped old ladies' purses." He managed to escape this tunnel – both the literal and the metaphorical one – only after his mother became ill. "Because of the things I was doing – things that make me feel awful now, bad things I was doing like robbing and sniffing glue – she suffered an aneurism in her brain. If something worse had happened, I don't know if I would have been able to forgive myself for doing that to her." The break with his past – the moment when he "came out into the light," as he puts it in his video – came with the sense of guilt that only his mother's suffering could inspire.

¹ Presentation to the Escola Brasileira de Psicanálise, Seção Santa Catarina, October 2006.

² In Portuguese, this phrase is much more ambiguous than in English, meaning "Only a mother's love," but also "only a mother could love" and even "Love only comes from the mother."

Amparo, a conflict mediator in the Kennedy neighborhood of Medellín, told me a similar story. In her neighborhood, the gang leader was Jhonny, a killer and dealer of the worst kind, but a man with a great and sincere affection for his mother. He bought one thing after another for her: clothes, household appliances, and a house. Jhonny knew that what he was doing wasn't good, but everything he did was to improve his mother's life. Amparo met Jhonny's mother through a neighborhood association, and began talking to her about life in the neighborhood, about violence, justice, and exclusion. Amparo found out that Jhonny's mother didn't like what her son was doing, but she didn't want to criticize him because she thought that she could lose her son if she did so. Amparo, also a woman of the working class, was aware of how her life changed after she read Gandhi's autobiography, so she gave a copy of this book to Johnny's mother.

In the following weeks, Amparo and Johnny's mother talked about the book, reflecting on the possibility of fighting against violence with peace and ethics. Jhonny's mother admitted that she was part of the problem: after all, accepting presents was what allowed her son to lead an unjust life of a criminal and a killer. Mother's Day arrived, perhaps the most important holiday in Medellín, and Jhonny came over in the morning with a special present for his mother: an expensive gold watch. The mother gathered her courage and said "I don't want it, my dear son. But when you bring me a present that you earn with your own sweat, that will be the best day of my life."

Jhonny, the big and tough gang leader, cried loudly enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. Within a week, he left his gang position and went abroad, where he is now the director of a conflict resolution program for youth, and from where he writes to his mother.

While working with children and teenagers from the most violent favelas of Recife, Brazil, I was stunned by their ability to memorize long and complex rap lyrics. One of the songs that every child knew was "*Desculpa Mãe*" (Forgive me, Mother), by the group Fação Central. The song is a letter to a mother, asking for her forgiveness: "Forgive me, Mom, for keeping you from smiling..." Whether among gangsters in Brazil, hired

killers in Medellín, or thieves in Argentina, a mother's love is the only force capable of inspiring guilt or shame. I want to show here that this love is also the force that constitutes the ethical subject.

The gangsta life promises a direct path to what Lacan called *jouissance* (badly translated in English as "enjoyment"): the pleasures of drugs, promiscuous sex, and of other people's fear and respect. Equally powerfully, the gun offers almost unlimited power to a child. Using Lacanian slang, we might say that crime deludes the criminal into thinking that he is not castrated, but equally important is that criminal *jouissance* follows the Freudian logic of the *Treib*, the drive. For Lacan and Žižek, the difference between desire and drive lies in their relationship with the *objet petit a*, the mysterious thing that inspires and centers what I want. With the drive, one gains access to *jouissance* exactly through the failure to get the desired object. Think of the shopping mall: buying more and more commodities isn't about having, but about the strange joy of returning home, and then several days later saying, "You know, this isn't exactly what I wanted. Let's go back to the mall."

Teenage heroin addicts have told me that the first time they used heroin, it was just like arriving in paradise, but every other time they used the drug, it was merely a vain attempt to re-capture that first experience. What turns the drug into an addiction isn't the physiology as much as the ritual: surreptitious buying, cleaning the needle, tying the band on the arm... *and always knowing that it isn't going to work, that the paradise of the first experience will never happen again.* At first, the *jouissance* comes from the heroin, but after that, it comes from the *failure* of the drug, the constant, pointless circulation around the object, like a planet trapped by the gravity of a black hole. Gang life plays by the same rules, finding its *jouissance* in the failure of drugs, power, and sex. The Comando Vermelho – the most powerful drug mafia in Rio de Janeiro – takes as its slogan "the right side of the errant life",³ a powerful description of the drive. "Errant" means wrong and failed, but it still preserves traces of its original meaning as "wandering" or "lost", like the knight errant or the *judeu errante*.⁴ The "right side of the errant life"

³ "O lado certo da vida errada."

⁴ In Portuguese and Spanish, this is the phrase used for the anti-Semitic trope of the "Wandering Jew".

means that one finds his *jouissance* in the act of erring, in the vain and wandering circulation around the absent or unattainable *objet petit a*.

What can break the circular *jouissance* of the drive? A mother's suffering. Alejandro described it perfectly when he said that "If something worse had happened, I don't know if I would have been able to forgive myself for doing that to her." In forgiving ourselves (or blaming ourselves), we fold ourselves over. One part of us forgives, while the other is forgiven. This folding or doubling permits us to look at ourselves, reflect, examine ourselves: it is as if we stood outside looking in. Here we find the philosophical definition of consciousness, the birth of the subject. Žižek calls this process "the bone in the throat", a barrier that prevents direct access to *jouissance*, and as such, catalyzes a subject who can desire and search. Lacan might say when Alejandro's mother became ill, he realized that he was a "divided subject." For Alenka Župancic, guilt breeds the conscience necessary for us to be free. However we phrase it, the basic truth behind the jargon is that when a gangster's mother begins to suffer, his self-contained world breaks down, he takes conscience of his actions, and he comes to recognize that something real exists outside of his drive. This "call of conscience" – a call that divides the subject between the active, blaming part and the passive, blamed part – gives birth to the subject.

Ever since Plato wrote *The Symposium*, one metaphor has dominated the way that the West has seen love: the story that Plato puts in the mouth of Aristophanes. In the time of myth, humans were whole, complete, and round, but in a great tragedy, these beings were split, and now we spend our lives looking for our "other halves" so that we can be whole again. Gangster wisdom shows us that the truth of love is exactly the opposite: *love doesn't make us complete. It breaks the economy of the drive. It divides.* And as such, it allows a person to see himself. When a mother's pain and love forces her son to look at himself honestly, he can become a real subject.

How, then, can we talk of "the maternal role"? A mother creates the space in which her child can become a subject. First, she teaches her child that he is not omnipotent, that he does not have direct access to *jouissance*. Then, when the child sees himself in his mother's eyes, he also sees his mother looking at him. He sees himself as the *objet* of

the mother's gaze, but also as a *subject* capable of gazing upon her. In Lacanian mathemes, the gaze of the mother is the first step toward the \$, the divided subject. In the midst of a mother's love, a child gains a conscience.

"*Amor só de mãe*" isn't a cynical slogan, nor is it pessimist or nihilist. It shares with Lacan the idea that "*le rapport n'existe pas*," the critique of the myth of love as fullness, the encounter of two broken halves, but it goes further. "Only a mother's love" insists that love is not union, but that love still exists, and that it is powerful enough to force a gangster to change his life.

Most importantly, however, is that the phrase "Only a mother's love" shows us that love doesn't just come from the mother. We could see this same process in a father's love, or a husband's, or a friend's. Love happens when we gain the ability to divide ourselves, criticise ourselves, and look at ourselves from outside. A mother's love gives birth to more than a child: it gives birth to the subject.