

# Paralyzing effect of sensory over-stimulation – case report

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## SUMMARY

This case study investigates the application of the psychotherapy for the five year old Douglas suffering from over-stimulation. First kind of over-stimulation was associated with excess of external stimulation from his mother and painful ear infections. Secondly, there was an excess of internal stimulation from an absence of any release of tension. At the beginning of the therapy his verbal and nonverbal communication skills were highly impaired. His actions did not encourage any further interaction. Furthermore he had some major language difficulties. After two and a half years of therapy it was possible to restart a fundamental human process of psychomotor integration of sensory stimulation.

KEY WORDS: sensory stimulation, case report

## STRESZCZENIE

### Paralizujący efekt nadmiernej stymulacji sensorycznej – opis przypadku

Studium przypadku analizuje zastosowanie psychoterapii u pięcioletniego Douglasa cierpiącego z powodu nadmiernej stymulacji. Źródłem tego stanu była głównie matka chłopca oraz bolesne infekcje ucha, z którymi zmagał się przez dwa lata. Oprócz tego występowała u niego również nadmierna wewnętrzna stymulacja spowodowana brakiem możliwości uwolnienia napięcia. Na początku terapii werbalne i niewerbalne umiejętności komunikacyjne chłopca były wysoce ograniczone. Jego zachowania w żaden sposób nie odzwierciedlały jakiegokolwiek chęci do interakcji z drugą osobą. Oprócz tego zmagał się on również z poważnymi trudnościami językowymi. Po dwuipółletniej terapii możliwe było przywrócenie fundamentalnych funkcji procesu psychomotorycznej integracji stymulacji sensorycznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: stymulacja sensoryczna, studium przypadku

## Background

Psychotherapy with children under the age of eleven or twelve inevitably makes use of the body in movement or the movement of one or several figurines. As up to this age, children have a very limited capacity for introspection and for verbalizing sensations. However, through playing, drawing and sculpting the child can express his entire internal world, often very clearly. A therapist must be able to identify with his or her young patient and to rediscover his or her own internal child in order to participate in the child's games, in order to help the child explore his fears and to allow him to integrate certain traumatic experiences left in abeyance in his psychophysical universe. Bioenergetics can be integrated into a child's psychotherapeutic process, but with some reservations. The positions of stress or tension encouraged in bioenergetics are based on the Freudian idea that the subject develops through frustration. I personally think that human beings develop through a dialectic between „hard” and „soft”, difficult and gentle, tension and relaxation, that is frustration and satisfaction. Thus a therapist can propose to children exercises that are „hard” and distressing and others that are „soft” and calming. Mentally ill children often experience major difficulties accessing ambivalence, which only becomes possible with the integration of polarities, be they tonic, sensory, affective or representative [1].

Moreover, positions of stress are positions of bodily and emotional disorganization and they test the subject's

ability to destructure and then to restructure himself. However, prior to the age of eleven, which corresponds to the age at which a person integrates a normal motivity including a representation of himself with meaning, one cannot take the risk of destructuring a child without knowing that child's ability to verbalize his body and his fantasies.

In my clinical experience, young patients have demonstrated that there is no distance between their psychic defence systems and their psychomotor structure. Thus, in order to protect themselves or to defend themselves from others, they use the material of the their own structure to project themselves onto the other [2]. One must therefore be very careful with a child before having them face the test of bodily hypertension. One must take into consideration the psychomotor development of the child.

Lowen [3] explains that bioenergetics comprises manipulations that aim at relaxation and specific exercises that aim at becoming aware of one's own tensions. I think that one can also offer children exercises which allow them to experience gentleness and relaxation, along with tactile manipulations that will give them access to „hard” feelings which are very distressing for children in this age range. I would also like to specify that I never propose any exercise of tension or relaxation as long as the child has not brought me there himself in the unfolding of his story. Thus, I have accompanied children in therapy sometimes without the use of any psychophysical exercise.

## Case report

Douglas was nearly five years old when I met him for the first time. He was a little red-haired boy with green eyes. He did not respond when I greeted him, did not look me in the eyes and did not seek contact. He had been followed by a speech therapist since the age of three due to major language difficulties. This speech therapist sent him to me because she was not making any progress with him. At school, his teacher complained of his lack of concentration: „Douglas is always somewhere else, on the moon; he never listens to anything; he never follows instructions; he is always responding off the point; he never plays with the other children; he can't fit into the group; nobody understands what he says; he's strange."

Douglas had many ear infections during the first two years of his life. His mother spoke loudly, quickly and a lot; she trivialized and generalized all of her child's behavior patterns. She understood and interpreted his mental universe with very simple, basic equations: He only plays with toy cars because he's a boy; he only names objects with colors because he's sensitive; he doesn't answer when you call him because he's a dreamer; he doesn't follow instructions and gets enraged because he has a strong personality. She affirmed that she knew everything about him. Every description of the child led to a personal interpretation aimed at making the situation less alarming. However, the mother complained about her child's behavior: he's an angel or a demon; he's aggressive with her; he's not patient, jumps from one thing to another, can never concentrate on a game; he's adorable, but sometimes „it's like he's crazy." Only spankings or cold water on the face would calm him.

His mother alternated between being defensive and being seductive. Her body moved away or towards me, her face paled or blushed, she twisted her hands. I got the feeling that she was anxiety-ridden, certainly invaded by an immense sense of guilt, and ready to fall apart. She was in a feeling of all-powerfulness. Her words made me think that she often behaved paradoxically with Douglas. She did not touch him very often and even pushed him away. She was very often overcome by death anxieties that had overwhelmed her when she was pregnant with Douglas. She was currently seven months pregnant and much afraid of losing the second child.

Douglas's mother left no room for the father to speak. He sat docile on the couch, like „a big timid boy," affable looking, but he did not seek to express himself. He did not take care of his child, but would take Douglas in the car when he went shopping. He did not seem to be at all aware of his son's suffering. He trivialized the situation by saying that he recognized himself in his son, that he too had been in his own world.

While the parents spoke, Douglas grabbed onto the toy cars and pushed them around on the floor in a line. He did not respond when I spoke to him, neither through

a change in bodily movements nor through changes of rhythm in his gestures. It was as if he did not hear.

In order to make things go more quickly, his mother systematically washed him, dressed him, undressed him, put on his shoes and fed him. In any case, she said, he did not obey and she was always obliged to scream and to hit him. When the mother described this, Douglas got up and went towards his father with two fingers of his right hand in his mouth and his left hand in his pants. I got the feeling he was very anxious. The father seemed to represent a person who provided him with a little protection from the mother's violent and excessive behavior. The parents went on to describe their respective families which suffered a lot and were organized by behaviors of alcoholization, intrusion, and emotional capture and abandonment.

During this first appointment, I suggested free drawing and Douglas drew a thin, fragile circle with two sticks coming out one from each side. Then he took a second sheet, drew another circle, two limbs, hair on the head, with traits inside which could have represented a mouth, a nose and eyes. I asked him to tell me about his drawings. He did not respond, turned the sheet over and drew a series of parallel lines. Then he babbled to such an extent I wondered if he was delirious. I had the impression he had made up a language of his own. I did not understand what he said, but his drawings told me: „This is where I am: I am a person who is not very developed and another who is more developed, and between the two there is a path or parallel lines."

The mother continually intervened. She translated what her son said, responded for him and interrupted her husband. She took up all the space. I had trouble ending the appointment because her anxiety overflowed into an invasive logorrhoea.

I felt disconcerted by this child. His symptoms led me to presume there was a retreat at a young age nearing a retreat into autism. He was in relational avoidance: his face was serious, the look in his eyes absent and peripheral, he sat loosely on the floor as if he had no spinal column, he did not respond to his name. His actions did not encourage further interaction. Yet he played with the cars quickly and nervously, and I had the feeling that he was mentally following a story. This reassured me. I thought that Douglas was a little boy who must have had to confront, from the day he was born, painful over-stimulation of two kinds. First, there was an excess of external stimulation from his mother's hitting and screaming, from being pushed around, and from the painful ear infections. The child also must have absorbed like a sponge all the maternal anxieties which are all painful stimulation for a baby. Secondly, an excess of internal stimulation from an absence of any release of tension because the mother, too centered on herself, entirely lacked empathy; she did not understand her little boy but projected on him her desires and fantasies. She could not manage to make

sense of her child's emotions and she did not provide any relief through tenderness.

Moreover, the father did not fulfil his role of providing support to help Douglas grow up. He did not offer his vertebral column for the child to lean on. He did not incarnate the third party, intermediary position between the child and his mother. He was undoubtedly very infantile himself and little capable of counterbalancing the strength of this invasive woman.

Since his birth, Douglas had found himself in a situation of terrible sensory and emotional overload that he did not know how to name. He had no representations for what he had been experiencing. He was currently equipped with insulating defense systems which protected him from external over-stimulation but which at the same time did not allow him to communicate with the outside world. He must have been experiencing immense solitude in a armored tonic envelope [1]. As a first stage, I decided I would begin by helping this child lower the psychophysical tension – combined hypertonicity and anxiety – by allowing him to express the terror and the violence he must have stored up inside himself. As a result, he would have access to other dimensions of his sensory equipment and be able to explore the imaginary world in which he had taken refuge. I would help him name what he needed to return to earth, to anchor himself and to brave external reality. These were my hypotheses and ideas when I started out. I would see him once a week.

During the first session, Douglas calmly entered the room. He went straight to the toy cars. His mother wanted to come in as well, saying she would stay with him because he was going to be afraid. I reassured her and refused. I told Douglas what we were going to do together, presented the different games and toys and asked him what he wanted. I was surprised to hear him respond in a simple and direct manner. He wanted to play with the cars. It then occurred to me that his incomprehensible and disconcerting language was a protective system screening him from his too-invasive mother.

During several sessions, I watched the same scene without being able to join in the game because Douglas ignored me: the child made the cars fall off imagined cliffs nobody saw. Short clear sentences alternated with unintelligible jabber. He seemed to be saying that everything was going to break. He knocked two cars together and asked one, very precisely, „You didn't break anything? " The other did not reply. He did not create characters per se but he was very gentle with, attentive to and concerned about the cars. He completely invested in the relationship with them as if they were living beings.

When I asked him to draw a person, he sat down in front of a piece of paper and said, „I don't know how to draw a person." His voice brimmed with depreciation and despair. For several sessions, the child reacted to any offer to draw, play with building blocks or sculpt as if it were an order and he stopped himself, depreciating himself.

This negative sentiment was linked in part to his mother's hold over his bodily activities (eating, dressing, washing, etc.) which deprived him of access to his own bodily representations and his own capacity for action. It was also linked in part to the feelings of depreciation which invade all humans whose experiences are not recognized, reinforced, or understood by a parent. Faced with an over-protective and possessive mother, Douglas no longer had access to his capacity for creativity and for developing his own desires. He remained in a state of responding to primary, fundamental needs: he needed things right now or he cut himself off totally from the world. He had no tolerance for frustrations and was incapable of representing them.

This first part of his therapy was a period of discovery of objects and the environment. We would spend several sessions experimenting with the sensation of his hand on mine and vice versa when I drew for him. I accompanied him in his activities and I limited myself to reformulating his sentences and to amplifying his emotional experience. For example, when a car fell off the cliff, I said, „Oh no, it fell. It must hurt," or „That's terrible, it didn't see the edge of the cliff! It must have been very frightened."

One day, after the nth reformulation of this kind, Douglas went towards the pieces of paper and drew zigzags in red and black. He said nothing more, but I knew at this point that he comprehended what I said to him. Something of the boredom and sensory anesthesia was breaking down under the impact of the emerging emotions of anger and fear.

From this point on, Douglas watched me, he listened more attentively when I named what those incessantly falling cars could have been experiencing. I thought if he trusted me more, he could certainly express his violence without fearing that he would destroy himself or me. I therefore decided to intervene more actively in the session. I built a castle in blocks and put my car inside it. He took a car, entered the castle and demolished it while screaming, „I had a nightmare." He did not say anything else, but I understood that he was speaking about the beginning of his life, about his painful encounter with his anxiety-ridden mother, with the outside world and about the terror he must have felt.

I did not insist, because it was in the difference of attitudes between his parent and myself that something could be expressed. The fact of not reproducing the intrusive actions of the parent, which the child expected or was used to, provoked a double feeling of worry and relief. This emotional conflict provoked an anxiety which would then translate into the emergence of an emotion or into an enactment. Douglas then went to the drawing paper, traced two tracks of different colors and said firmly, „This is not a doodle, it's a drawing." He was asking me to understand him, not to depreciate him and not to judge him. I reassured him that I was listening attentively, affirming to him that I did not know everything about

him and that he was free to express himself as he wished. So he took another sheet and drew a person and a vehicle, „It’s a chariot.” I considered that we had completed a first stage when Douglas symbolized what was happening between us on a therapeutic level. He accepted the holding I proposed [4]. We had been working together for four months.

From this moment on, Douglas put me to work for him. He asked me to construct garages, bridges, roads, and toboggans with different wooden blocks. He then caused terrible accidents, spoke rapidly in gibberish, but then would say no more. I became his right-hand man. I tried to introduce ambulances and tow-trucks but he didn’t react to my offers of repair. I had to simply reconstruct it all in order for him to continue to enact his destructiveness. The repetition of these scenes led to his first identifications with me. At the end of one session, he looked at a car and wanted to take it home with him, saying simply, „It’s because I have the same, it’s the same.” Remembering that these cars are animated for him and that he breathed life into them, I interpreted this sequence of events as manifesting the creation of a link between his home and my office, between him and me. He recognized some similitude between the two of us. Differentiation would come later. By opening up this possible space of fusion, he would then be able, provided he felt secure, to separate and to become autonomous.

It was at this time that I thought he formulated the existence of his true self (different from me) and his false self (the same as me). Winnicott [4] writes that the false self becomes established upon the basis of identifications and that it is represented by an adapted social attitude. To have the same car, to be the same car is being the other, like the other, in the image of the other’s desire.

In the session just prior to the summer holidays, I sensed he was nervous. He colored a sheet of paper red and for the first time drew a castle, his Self. He then moved on to the building blocks, built and demolished a castle and with a brutal movement, threw a block into my face. I took his hands into mine, told him the rule of non-violence and asked him to express the same thing in words.

„Not happy,” he said. His feeling of anger was most certainly linked to the abandonment he felt about the upcoming separation due to the holiday period. I reassured him, saying that I would think about him. And then he left. This second period was a period of transition. A bond of transfer was in place. Douglas could now relieve traumatic situations with me and experience them in a supportive relationship.

When I saw him again in September, he expressed himself with less confusion. He had eliminated many of the parasitic words. He again put me to work for him but with a very authoritarian, very parental tone of voice. I decided to partially oppose him and I refused certain things. He gave me a black car and asked me to build my house.

He demolished it with a police car. I protested: „You don’t have the right! It’s not fair!” I played out what he has never been able to express: revolt, a feeling of injustice, powerlessness, opposition to his intrusive mother who knows everything and runs his life. Each new emotional situation that emerged we repeated several times. Douglas could then express his need for safety. He drew several houses without roofs (toit, in French, pronounced „twa”) or windows and asked me to add them. He needed something protective, a roof but also a „toi” – a „you”, also pronounced „twa” – and an opening to the outside.

## Results

In order to better help him express his fears, I asked him what was in the sky above the house. He answered very quickly: an airplane, a helicopter and a vessel, but he did not want to draw them. Drawing them meant making them appear, and Douglas was feeling a lot of anxiety. With his agreement, I took his hand to draw the plane and the helicopter, but he did not want to draw the vessel. Then in one of the following sessions, he drew a red house around which there were other smaller houses, some orange, violet and blue, one yellow and one green. He declared, „The yellow is a boy, the green a girl.” At this point I knew the yellow represented him and the green undoubtedly represented his little sister, born a few months earlier. Later he would draw a person and would write his first name in capital letters. It took us one year to attain a climate sufficiently safe for this, and for Douglas to feel ready to confront the enormous fears that paralyzed him and kept him from existing fully.

During the first period of the second part of his therapy, Douglas expressed his archaic anxieties of being devoured. First he drew a red witch eating a child. Then he spent several sessions drawing witches doing bad things and then tore up these drawings before throwing them away. I encouraged him to speak to the witch and tell her everything he held against her. He beat on cushions, fought with a big pillow, wrestled with a blanket. He always came out victorious and happy.

Slowly he came out of the paralyzed state in which he had been tetanized [5]. One day, Douglas sat a red and a yellow car down next to me and ordered me to enact a scene. „Do it!” he said. I introduced a mean person who wanted to steal the red car. Douglas took up the yellow one and killed the thief. Then he announced that the red car just became the mother of the yellow car. I understood this as follows: if the mean mother disappeared (the character), the good mother could appear (red) for her child (yellow).

I said, „This car [the yellow one] would like a mother who protects him from the bad people.”

„Yes,” he responded.

He was able to conceive of a „good mother” (a good object) who would protect him and defend him against

the bad. But a difficulty arose: the child took out two other trucks, one yellow and one blue and spoke to my red car. „I am your mother,” he said making the yellow truck speak, „Come with us!” His tone was authoritarian. (I think that the trucks represented the grandparents who were very possessive according to Douglas’s mother).

I, being the red car, his good mother, protested a little, „No. I’m staying here. I am the mother of my child, I am no longer your little girl!”

He moved his yellow car away, „No, I’m going with my parents,” he replied, submissive. I felt very moved by this sequence of events. Douglas seemed in despair in telling me that his mother could not become a good mother as long as she remained subjected to and under the influence of her own parents.

He drew a witch and threw it away. He was getting rid of terrorizing parental images and was cleaning up his fantasy world. When I suggested he should draw a fairy, he drew a daddy-fairy which he threw away quickly. The representations of his mother were split into good and bad, but he was in an emotional and representative ambivalence over his father. I then drew a „whole” good fairy, that is, one representing full satisfaction, the ideal other. He watched, surprised, then took my pen, wrote his name, folded the paper, stapled it and took it home with him. I had become the good object upon which he could lean in order to exist. The therapeutic idea is to help the child counterbalance the presence of an internalized „bad parent” with good elements - the „bad parent” corresponding to the sensory-tonic state, not the person, at moments when the parent is not satisfying the child fully, and the „good parent” being that state at times of satisfaction. The creating of a link and the dialectic between opposing poles allows the integration of these experiences [2].

Then Douglas would move on to explore how the bad parent made him suffer: by denying his actions and his productions, by causing him fear through the fits of anger, by subjugating him without any explanations. I helped him enact both the authoritarian parent who terrorized the child and the frightened child who dared to rebel and to create opposition. That would allow him to express the interdictions he had internalized, notably the one forbidding him to open up to the outside world and to have different and autonomous thoughts. By acting out the wicked witch who humiliated, depreciated and broke the emotional flow which brings jubilation in creation, Douglas had access to meaning, expressing the parental words, feelings and injunctions that were paralyzing him in his actions and in his words. He was no longer just a bad boy who did not obey and who only did bad things, but he recognized himself as a victim. He came out of the paralyzed state which had accompanied massive depreciation.

This part of the therapy which separated the aggressor from the aggressed, the bad parent from the suffering

child, made it possible to do more in-depth identification work. Two weeks later, Douglas arrived and announced, „Now, my name is John.” I was not really surprised that Douglas approached the question of his false self in this manner, but it is more frequent for children to give another name to a figurine. In a breathtaking identification amalgamation, the child went from a nice witch to a bad one, from Douglas to John. Then the characters stabilized and the theme of the prison kept coming back: the subjugated yellow car went to prison when ordered to do so by the witch, but then ran away at night when the world was sleeping. It was very repetitive, rapid and wearing. I proposed having someone nice enter the scene to defend him. After a few tries with characters who run away from the witch, he showed his two fingers of his right hand (those he had put in his mouth). The fingers delivered the cars and the wicked witch, furious, died and fell into a hole. He had invested the two fingers of his right hand with the power to console and the potential to save. He reappropriated his body and his psychomotility. He invested his organism as a body representing him. He revitalized himself and the psychophysical work could take on another dimension.

The repetition of the prison and running away scenes began to wear on me. I felt tense and imprisoned. Based on these feelings, I responded, „It’s too hard. Garages are for cars, I want a house for people. Come on, let’s go draw a house and build it.” He sketched a house with two windows, which still had bars on them, and we moved towards the large lightweight, rectangular cushions that could serve as walls. I helped him build a house. He got into the house and asked me to use building blocks to build a garage next to it for the cars. He differentiated the hardness of the car-objects and the softness of the boy-humans. At the end of the session he knocked down the house, rolled on the cushions and cried out, „It’s all soft.” He laughed. He had the sensorial experience of the gentleness and the softness of relaxing. Acceding to this polarity of the soft would allow him, once it was sufficiently integrated, to set up an integration dialectic between the two poles and to create intermediary positions [3].

He then decided we would be two Johns, two of the same. He invented the game of the mirror and I had to do the same thing he did, and in his car games the red became the yellow. We were two false selves who obeyed each other. Douglas had a lot of fun playing the one who obeyed and he made a caricature out of the one who commanded. He had been in therapy for 18 months. In playing his false self, Douglas could get rid of it and access his real self. This second part of his therapy led to a period with more emphasis on analyzing his identity.

A third part of his therapeutic work began with his return from the summer holidays. At the first session, he sat on my couch and with a very affirmative voice said, „Let’s talk a bit. I had a dream and a nightmare.” He drew a head with teeth and a lateral form like an ear hanging from the

right side. „It’s an A. I did it! This monster scared me.” Then he drew his nightmare: „The ghost is on the moon. We’re finished.” He drew with crayons and spoke really quickly. Then he turned away from the desk and went to the toys. I was stupefied by the symbolic clarity of these drawings and his words. His dream was to succeed in learning to write, his school phobia; his nightmare was that his real self did not exist on earth, ejected like a ghost to the moon [1].

He started playing again. With a little pink car, Tessy, representing a good object, he fed the red car which was imprisoned by the witch. Tessy demolished the wicked witch’s house, and then Douglas returned to the drawing and wrote on the bottom of the page John-Douglas. He had finally established an alliance between the two identities. He was not yet whole, but he was no longer totally split. After this point, his drawings were more spontaneous and contained several characters. He drew a lot in yellow which was his identifying color. One day he began this way: „We’re going to play the witch who is mom.” I agreed, but suggested he draw a tree first. Relying on my intuition, I had thought that in order to confront this witch-mother, he needed a support or something to lean on. With a tree, my idea was to help him explore his grounding and to make him feel secure. He drew a tree with feet: „It’s a crossed out tree because it’s ugly.” His tree symbolized his life force and his ability to exist autonomously which had not been recognized. He had been cut off (crossed out) from his identity as a boy, from his ability to speak for himself, as a subject. He was experiencing major narcissistic suffering. He was undoubtedly also talking about his father who had not been recognized in his role as a separating authority. Then he added ears to the tree: for the moment, I was the one who was listening, who supported him and who guided him. He could then analyze how his tonic envelope has been transformed into a tonic wall [1].

„The car cannot turn into a little boy,” he said.

„Yes,” I responded, „I understand, the little boy turned into a car to be harder and faster in order to escape from the witch.” Faced with terrifying relational experiences, Douglas’s tonic envelope had become tense and hardened. The child found himself surrounded by a tonic wall that was as hard as a shell. Douglas identified himself with this hard and rigid envelope resembling the body of a car. He grasped onto the outside object, the car, which corresponded in a tactile way to what he was experiencing inside, somewhat in the manner of autistic children [6]. Psychically, the protective envelope hardened and led to an psychophysical anesthesia. The tonic envelope became an armor which contained elements of his true self. In fantasies, the real self was ejected far away, put into orbit, while the false self was at the service of the suffering parent and hid the true self. Winnicott [4] underlined that the function of the false self was to dissimulate and to protect the true self. Physically, the child called on his

back muscles and rigidified. He threw his shoulders back, and it was as though he were uplifted by his tense trapezoids. His feet were not sufficiently anchored in the ground. The child then asked me to play a John who was protecting him from his tyrannical master. We inverted roles. He could then recuperate the natural functions of curiosity and openness to the outside which belonged to his real self.

He played out the scene of a black aeroplane and a white one going to fight against the witch. Douglas was feeling his power and validating his rebellion. He needed to reappropriate his aggressiveness in order to put it to his service, particularly to reinvest his learning capacities. This session seemed important to me. Douglas reestablished the sensory black/white polarity which allows the sensorial analysis of different life events [5]. He had let go of the subjective values of yellow and red to step back and analyze life based on sensory polarities more universal in the common integration process. Just as extreme suffering and extreme pleasure are the psychophysical limits of all human beings, black and white are the extremes which frame the sensorial field. We would then explore together hard and soft, the things black and disagreeably, followed by the things white and gentle.

One day after these exercises, the child got dressed to leave and said, „Say John.”

„Goodbye John.”

He went out the door and on the other side said, „Now, it’s Douglas.”

„Goodbye Douglas.” He knew he was bringing to me the part of him that was suffering, the false self, the part of him that sacrificed himself for his parent, the part that protected his real self. I felt a very strong emotion of tenderness and admiration for this little boy.

The third part of his therapy came to an end when he drew a tree surrounded by a brown bark. He had left behind his metallic enclosure. He had acquired an internal feeling of safety great enough to allow him to confront his terrors without breaking down and without the need for too rigid of an envelope. His tree, metaphor for his internal psychic axis and his bodily axis, took his place in the structuring of the representation of his motivity and of his identity as a little boy.

During the fourth part of his therapy, Douglas went from despair to hope in successive phases. He expressed that his yellow car, „cannot turn into a man because he’s not strong enough.”

Then I spoke for him and demanded from the witch, „My son is a car. I want him to be a little boy.”

He responded, „No, not men, they don’t have any purpose, cars are better, they fly everywhere.”

I insist, „We do not need men, we are cars.” In addition to the difficulties of change Douglas was expressing, I felt the omnipresence of the possessive mother who refused to humanize her child and to concede a place to the father, agent of the laws of differentiation.

„I cannot become a little boy because the witch will catch me.“ The little boy was playing out the refusal of the law and of limits: he refused to leave the office at the end of the session, touched objects he was not allowed to touch, escaped from his mother when she came to get him. When I proposed we change roles and to be the witch, he refused because he was afraid. He began to feel his fear and he was no longer only in his fantasy but in his actual feelings.

I participated in his extermination of humans. We danced together, we made music and I spoke on behalf of the possessive mother: „I am stronger than the world. I am the master of the world. There is no human on this planet. Everyone must obey me and do as I say. Ha! Ha! I only want robots.“ I also took on the mother’s manner of speaking. Douglas knew those injunctions well: „Yes, master, good, master.“ He was both excited and afraid, in an emotional oscillation that rapidly modified his facial features.

A change of identity was taking form. He was making enormous progress in school, but reading remained a problem because he was still too afraid to allow the words and thoughts of others enter him. His aggressiveness took shape. He now drew spaceships with gray cannons and enacted a war, „because there are extraterrestrials in this ship.“ The return of Douglas’s true self was becoming clearer. The symbolization was becoming more and more important. Together we drew interlacing shapes and Douglas placed eyes in each of the closed loops. He was under high surveillance, persecuted by the eyes of the other who judged him. He escaped from the witch at night when she was sleeping like he escaped from harsh reality by dreaming.

He then expressed his mother’s intrusion of his body. He was in a prison guarded by monsters. I asked for his freedom on his behalf. „What is being free?“ He asked on behalf of the monsters.

„It’s being able to be different one from another without being afraid.“

Upon his request, we returned to the games of being at school, with blackened and crossed-out notebooks or with a nice and valorizing teacher. Rules of life and organization were taking shape. For the first time, Douglas expressed tenderness for me. Working on limits on several levels allowed him to differentiate tenderness from sexuality. He drew a black, poisonous apple. He was forbidden to eat it. He writes „LA“, the French feminine article, and crossed it out. „It’s forbidden,“ he said. It seems he was expressing that what his mother was giving him was poisoned because it was intrusive, it did not respect his body, his space by obliging him to be how she wanted him to be. At the same time, this forbade any relation to the feminine, because the feminine he had experienced was dangerous. His mother was nourishing him with the black of anxiety and of possession. She washed and eroticized his body to excess. She still could not keep herself from doing it, she says, in order to go faster, despite my advice

to stop this practice. She was not tender with him, but her touch was incestuous, she overpowered him. Douglas felt this sensory abuse for which he did not have the capacities for integration.

He drew a no-entry sign blocking the direction of the black apple and an arrow authorizing access to a red apple. He was explaining how he was poisoned and imprisoned by his mother. I reformulated for him the right to belong to himself and the interdiction for anyone to take over for him. The next time, he wrote „LE“, the masculine article in French. Then he wanted to play the car and witch game. For the first time, John played with a police car that made the law. Douglas felt that his mother was outside the law through the various behavioral patterns she used to capture him. The witch (the therapist) looked into the empty prison in the morning and screamed with rage. The child broke out laughing. Then he said, „I had a dream. I had a friend who saved me.“ He had introjected a good object which could save him from the destructive witch. Reparation was finally possible. He had been in therapy for two years. Douglas had in a certain manner recuperated his true self. When his mother rang the bell, he burst out laughing, „It’s a big dog with a big nose who’s there,“ he says. I open the door. „Oh, the big monster,“ Douglas cried out laughing. His mother was very annoyed, totally unavailable for her son. She grabbed him by the arm and left quickly in a disquieting state of dispersion.

The activities and the creations of the child were now found in ambivalent territory. Douglas drew a Tyrannosaurus swallowing a goat, and said, „He swallows all the colors he likes.“ All of Douglas’s emotions, all the sensory expressions of his being, his entire emotional life had been swallowed by his anxiety-ridden mother. Then for the first time, instead of submitting, brother-cars opposed the monsters who had come to get them. The problem of limits was still present. He blocked the tracks on which he was prisoner. He little by little recuperated his true self. Remember the two human figures at the beginning of the therapy and the parallel lines? These symbolized the distance between his true self and his false self.

His showed more growth when one day with two cars, one – yellow – being called „I grew up“ and the other – pink – being called „Jack.“ He drew spots of color and granted them feelings: all the colors were nice except the black spot which was mean. His supportive process [1] finally went beyond the threshold of inborn physiological tonicity and sensation, managing to reach the level of affect and representation, for which one needs the words of others to give meaning.

I felt the joy of success. He drew a circle around all the colors: red, blue, yellow and black. He had reached the stage of ambivalence. But at the end of this so important session, his mother said, „This is the last time we will see you. We are moving.“ Then, seeing my shocked face, she said, „You didn’t know?“ I remain dumbfounded for a few

minutes and then got myself together again and explained that Douglas and I should spend a half an hour together to close off the structures and to say goodbye. She conceded to this. I felt and understood the dumbfounding effects such an unpredictable mother could have on the child. I thought about Douglas and I hoped that we had reached a stage in his psychomotor structuring that would allow him to stand up to a mother who was so neurotic.

## Conclusions

The first part of the therapy centered on the experience of our encounter. Like a mother with her baby, in empathy, I echoed his emotional and verbal expressions by giving meaning to what he made the cars do. He put me to work for him without really recognizing that I was someone separate from him. I experienced a great feeling of isolation like what he must have felt in his relationship with his absent parent or the parent lost in her own suffering. Then, towards the end of this period, I was torn between two feelings: I was bored when he played in front of me without seeing me. He was having me experience the solitude and emptiness he felt when he was without parental support. I wanted to lie down on the floor and move cars before my eyes in an repetitive and hypnotic manner. On the other hand, I felt on edge, as if this relational link were fragile and could break at any moment. Paradoxically, I felt a hypertonicity and a hypotonicity at the same time, signs of resistance and mechanical adaptation to maternal projections. Douglas had me enact a situation that was very precarious, an imminent danger, a little bit like those cliffs the trains and cars did not see and over which they fell. Douglas signaled a relational break by entering into his disquieting monologues: he spoke another language, his mother's. He took up parental injunctions, scolded a child, presented arguments. Everything was said in a rapid, cut-up voice, the words swallowed, the verbs before the subjects, the intonations often authoritarian. Sometimes the words followed one another in a neutral voice. I wanted to stop him. I couldn't think straight anymore. I was in a state of sensory over-stimulation (5). I felt the fear which animated him. He had internalized his mother's logorrhoea. The cliffs over which he had the cars fall were a metaphor for these ruptures in emotional communication with his mother who was suddenly invaded by death anxiety. He had been dumbfounded by this maternal violence, rigidified in a hypertonicity that stopped his thought processes. On the other hand, he was no longer connected to her and he experienced the anxiety of falling into emptiness. He held onto his mother's words like onto a fragile thread. He no longer spoke in his name. It was because he was able to enact, with my support enveloping and holding him, disaster situations over and over again that he was able to express his need for protection.

The second part of his therapy consisted of a major effort of putting into place the elements of his mental life. The expression of his anxieties joined forces with the recognition of the therapist as a good object. The introjection of a good object allowed the emergence of the false self, subjugated and frightened. This was a very delicate period for me because I had to help the child accept every part of himself that appeared what while helping him to differentiate between what belonged to him from what belonged to the internalized parent. At the beginning of life, the child is a mixture of identities: in the presence of a „bad mother,“ he is both author and victim of his own suffering, just as he will be savior and saved in the presence of a „good mother.“ When the good mother is present and warm, the child feels like a good subject; with the „bad mother“ the child experiences himself as a bad subject.

Children who spend the better part of their lives in hypertonicity lose the possibility of experiencing relaxation. This loss of psychophysical suppleness allies with a deep guilt: the child is both victim and aggressor and he will seek to mend this other who is still a part of his non-differentiated self. Hypertonic children can no longer manage to integrate what is good about life. In day to day life, they will demand it in the form of endless cuddling, sweets, and material satisfaction and in the intrapsychic world, this demand for the good will be linked to an ideal self that takes the form of magic, all-powerful characters.

The third part of Douglas's therapy aimed at the analysis of the false self and the development of the child's true self. Douglas explained under which constraints his false self had set itself up. He therefore accessed emotional ambivalence, which is a space of conflict between satisfactions and frustrations, between the good and the bad object. The ambivalence is accompanied by an envelope that is sufficiently flexible and protective, and a large part of therapeutic work aims at setting up limits and rules for interaction. I experienced tonic and emotional relief during this period because Douglas considered me really like a whole person apart. I was a valuable partner for him. I could help him and he was aware of it.

Finally, the fourth part of his therapy opened up to a work in constant bi-polarity. By creating links between opposing poles, the dialectic becomes possible. We worked on despair and rebellion, valorization and depression, action and passivity. Douglas organized his aggressiveness and put it to the service of his school learning. Like in many other therapies, towards end of the treatment, up his development became more complex because the integration process occurs at all of a person's organizational levels. I was pleased with Douglas's development and the difficulty for me was to avoid using his successes to fulfill my own narcissistic needs.

This psychotherapy lasted about two and a half years. We managed to restart a fundamental human process of psychomotor integration of sensory stimulation. Douglas



could have completely shut himself up in his own world and no longer have access to the outside world. His parents did not have the mental or emotional means to help him develop harmoniously. Yet, despite their personal difficulties, they brought him to his therapy very regularly. The final separation was as brutal as the emotional ruptures that the child regularly experienced with his mother. However, considering the stage of ambivalence that Douglas had attained, we can surmise that he was able to link and create a dialectic between the good and the bad object and more efficiently manage his object-relationships.

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