



# Kaleidoscope of Experiences: The Capability to be Surprised by Children

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Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them. (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 4)

## The Night of Identity

If you take a kaleidoscope and look through it in familiar surroundings, everything changes. There appears an opalescence in which usual things are hardly recognized. The diversity changes with every new position and may not be restrained by fixed lattices. Colors become dominant; shapes seem to be irrelevant. Nothing is singular. Top and bottom lose their significance. But the iridescence remains linked to a perceptive world, which must be organized in such a way that it can be diversified and mobilized. There must be trees and cars, so that the magic of opalescence can be displayed. The look through the kaleidoscope is teaching us that things present themselves in a huge variety. You cannot find their significance in “the night of identity” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 84), where everything is keenly defined: All cats are grey in the night.

In our experiences the meaning of objects is constituted as an ensemble of a perceptive world and perceiving subjects. They establish resonances of an organized world which provokes to be noticed and to be conceived. As adults we often forget this interaction, unless we work as artists, being always ready to wrest the imaginary from the reality. But usually, we form with increasing routine and mastering our situation an “armature of experience” (Benjamin, 1983), where everything is considered as “one normally does.” “Once we have seen through a visual puzzle, we cannot return to an ignorance of its solution” (Mays, 1978, p. 67). Significations stick on things like labels and guarantee an order in which you find your way. On the other hand, in the world of wide-awake adults the order of signification is not as stable as we often think. Thus a car is not only something to move forward, it is also important how it looks. Objects do not end with their intrinsic value, but go beyond their singular existence.

We must be mindful of the fact that within the various sense-making modes more than one possibility exists for the relationship of the ‘I’ to the objective world and that, therefore, various intentional spheres of objective reality are possible. (Langeveld, 1984, p. 217)

The possibilities cannot be concentrated in a kernel in the “night of identity,” around which the variations circulate like orbits of planets. Much more, things appear in relations as if they were handled, thought, perceived, created, and imagined.

How many things can this slipper actually be? It can be a slipper; it can also be a hairy something upon which one can slobber. In the first instance, it is a simple object-of-use; in the second, it is a purely sensual object-for-me. The child can also use the slipper as a hammer in order to pound a nail. In this case the slipper is no longer just an object-of-use; it is a used object: Certain objective thing properties—here the hard heel—are chosen to fulfill a thinglike function directed toward another thing. It is therefore a used object but not an object-of-use whose complete properties are directed toward a certain proper use, in this case, *as* a slipper. But a child can choose a specific property of the slipper whose use is not thing-directed. The slipper could be used as a doll’s cradle, for example. In this case, the slipper-become-cradle takes its meaning from the realm of the world of play and not from the common world as a tool directed toward accomplishing a task. (Langeveld, 1984, p. 217)

As adults, we obey conventions in organized milieus, in our occupation, in our family, and even in our spare time. But children have their own way of shaping their fields of perception, as specific margins of significances are not topped by conventions and habits. There is no need to identify all items. There is no need for a kaleidoscope for children to set solid orders going, because their expressive world itself wears a magic, prior to the distinction between potentiality and reality. Because we, as adults, are heirs of the specific Western Reason, our world has lost its magic, therefore we have so many difficulties in understanding childlike expressions. In this context it is a first and very important step to acknowledge this difficulty. That is, of course, not self-evident. Very often the child is regarded as not-yet-adult. Therefore, a priori, childlike expression gets a smell of deficit. This typical regard of adults causes shortsightedness, because we only take care of what we can retrace in our actual experiences, not considering possibilities we have lost. Childlike experiences are observed from their anticipated end as if waiting for the fulfillment of one’s expectations.

A simple example is the babble period, which precedes the conventional talking of children as described by Jakobson (1978). In this period, children are able to produce a symphony of phonetic shapes, which are to be found in the most different languages. Any adult who ever tried to immitate this onomatopoeia knows that he will fail. It is remarkable that the child loses the capacity of onomatopoeia to a large extent in that moment when he or she enters the usual communication in terms of the milieu language.

Even those sounds disappear in the beginning which remain in the conventional language. Learning to speak, therefore, means that the margin of behavior is transformed, being a privation and a gain at the same time. Achieved is the capability to communicate verbally, lost is the abundant phonetic skill. This example should point out that we, as adults, have to learn to appreciate the possibilities of children which we have lost as a premium for our sophisticated experiences.

The growth into the world of adults is not to be understood as a continuous progress from naivety toward competence, but as a precarious process of reorganizations in the field of experiences.

### The Time of Magic

Merleau-Ponty (1968) once asked:

Do we have the right to comprehend the time, the space of the child as an indifferentiation of *our* time, of *our* space, etc? . . . This is to reduce the child's experience to our own, at the very moment one is trying to respect the phenomena. For it is to think of it as the *negation of our* differentiations. It would be necessary to go all the way to thinking it *positively*, unto phenomenology. (p. 203)

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Here the entire problem is obvious: The problem is to understand children, to grasp their expressions, and not to play the fool in a mirror cabinet, always reflecting our own sights. We can overcome this dilemma only partly, only to the extent that we renounce trying to understand children entirely. The child is an Other, a sort of stranger in our world. We are sharing the tissue of a common world in such a way that a look through a kaleidoscope presupposes a world which can be deformed. Also as adults, we transgress the objective reality toward potentiality in dreams and imaginations. Our establishments of sense feed on these surpluses, which are constituted in the fact that comprehending is also noncomprehending: We cannot realize all aspects of a situation, and not all aspects of things can be considered at one time. The most difficult problem is that we cannot define childlike experiences in a precise way. Our conceptions would damage their intentions and most probably destroy precious traces. We can only thematize childlike possibilities as specific deviations, and that means that we cannot avoid implicating our own point of view.

The capability to be surprised by children has, therefore, to be learned. It must be exercised against the habit, to access children as little adults. An ideal teacher of this capability is Ton Beekman, who is an expert in listening to children's expressions without reducing them hastily to a rudimentary behavior of adults. Beekman, for example, tells with sharp vision the deviations of childlike behavior:

We, Sasha and me, visit an exhibition. He wants to be stamped on his hand, a rubber stamp one receives instead of an entrance ticket. He walks to the lady at the entrance, but at the wrong side. He does not know that one should not approach the person from the side where she sits, but that the conventional "good side" is at the front of the table. For us adults the lady is sitting "behind" the table. For Sasha this does not count. (1984, p. 23)

Beekman described well known occurrences that we witness daily. Children are hungry even when it is not lunch or dinner time. They like to press their hands and noses on panes of glass, without noticing how much the remaining prints upset the impression of recently cleaned windows. Children cannot wait for something which they want to have immediately. We guide children to a nice playground, but they prefer the heap of ruins next door. Children act in most cases unconventionally, or more precisely, preconventionally. The typical reactions of adults are known as well. We try to arrange the behavior of children into our standards by simple, but often energetic or extortionate, interventions. We are prepared to admit rapidly that the child does so far not know the correct way, without taking into consideration what the child knows in another way. Sasha knows that he is not allowed to make use of the rubber stamp on his own; he has to ask that very lady. On the other hand, it is for him not self-evident that there is a front and a rear of a desk, which as far as he is concerned can be reached from all sides. The growing up into the world of adults implies that establishment of special rules and conventions which favor some possibilities and suppress others. There will be set limits and patterns in the field of experience. Suddenly, there exists a "good" hand to say goodbye, and one has to remain at the luncheon table until that moment, when everybody has finished the meal. And in school, everyone has a special place which must be returned to day by day. One is not supposed to answer a question until permitted by the teacher to do so. The milieu of living obtains a reliable order; the magic of an expressive world loses its power. Hermann Hesse describes this process in an autobiographical fairy tale, *Kindheit des Zauberers*:

The desire and the dream [to become a magician] stayed with me for a long time. But it started to lose its overriding power; it had enemies; something different opposed it: something real, something serious, something undesirable. Slowly, slowly the bloom withered; slowly something limited approached me from the unlimited—the real world, the world of the adults. Slowly my wish to be a magician became less valuable for myself even though I continued wishing it with longing; it became childishness for myself. Already there was something which made me no longer a child. Already the unlimited thousandfold world of the possible was limited for me, divided into sections, cut by fences. Slowly the jungle of my days changed; the paradise around me froze. I did not remain what I was—prince or king in the country of the possible; I did not become a magician. (1974, pp. 115, 116)

The primeval forest of our days, the unsophisticated thinking remains the source of our experiences, but we gradually forget this foundation. The opalescence of potentiality within the reality withdraws into reservations: literature, painting, and music. Walks through those reservations teach us very often about the magic dimensions of our reality. They provide us with a strange regard of familiar situations and remind us of lost possibilities. Like an ethnologist in a foreign country, we look at the customs and usages at home. So we can read, for example, the reports of Carribean chief Tuiavii, who tells his tribe several curious stories about the Papalagi, whom he observed during his trips in Europe. The ethnological regard returns to Western Reason. He talks about the “extreme suffering from thinking”:

The life of Papalagi is similar to a man, who makes a trip by canoe and who thinks as soon as he leaves the shore: How much time will it take me to reach Savaii? He thinks, but he does not see the beautiful landscape he is passing by. (Scheurmann, 1977, p. 106)

This report reminds us of experiences Beekman is talking about:

As usual I pass on my way to my office in the institute a corridor. I simply pass it and do not notice that the walls have recently been painted. Sasha draws my attention to it. He is not only passing by, he is really present. (1984, p. 24)

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Childhood as the time of magic does not mean that here fantasy manipulates reality. The world itself is polymorphous and not yet governed by units which act like boundaries against violation of limits.

### **The Dawn of Reason**

Little Toni has a brother. Because Moritz has been delivered one month early, he needs medical care and surveillance for some time. Toni can watch his new brother through a window. Once, after such a visit, an uncle asked Toni, “How tall is Moritz now?” Toni does not answer, but seems to be irritated and somewhat angry. The uncle repeats his question, because he thinks it is quite simple and clearly understandable. Now, Toni is really embarrassed: “Moritz is not tall at all, he is very, very small.”

Normally, size is used as a unit of measure by adults, allowing more or less precise estimates. In this respect small means not too large. But for Toni, the question asked and the size of Moritz are not compatible. The question, how tall is Moritz, being that small, is for Toni just as strange as for us adults is the request to compare the moon and the coin in our pocket. There are incommensurabilities and impossibilities in the experiences of children, which lose their relevance in the uniform world of adults.

When a child distinguishes between two locomotives, a forward-locomotive and a backwards-locomotive, what is going on? Are two different aspects of one and the same thing being reified, or is it not rather a matter of more concrete ordering structures which have their own sense, a sense which can also assert itself against the reversible processes in which Piaget sees the culmination of cognitive development?  
(Waldenfels, 1982, p. 32)

If we appreciate such concrete orderings, and if we appreciate that children's expressions are not ruled by standards of how to say something, how to act in specific conventions, how to perceive identical objects, we can really be surprised by them. It is no nonsense we recognize, nor a not-yet-sense, but *another* sense which deviates from our usual experiences. A thorough look at children's capacities enlightens our own history of experiences. The thinking becomes aware of *l'histoire apparente* (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) of itself. This can be experienced only as a dawn, not a sunshine-state of reason; a twilight, in which one cannot decide when the day ends and the night begins. The question about the last moment of the day is just as foolish as the question about the last day of childhood. We can retrace our own prereflective foundations, if we try to understand children in a respectful manner, and if we try to find the tissue of world which links the experiences of both children and adults. With respect to this line of sight, we may recognize that children also wonder themselves about us, about our curious questions and customs. They definitely become surprised about the way adults act and communicate.

Grown-ups love figures. When you tell them that you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, "What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?" Instead, they demand: "How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 16)

Adults often approach each other in a frontal way; they shake hands, they practice rituals, communicating in standards with questions about the job, the family, the new car, and so forth. Children tend to approach not in a frontal, but in a lateral way, if they are not forced by drill. They thread themselves into our field of perception from the sides, they join in or entangle us in their acting, they involve themselves in our communication, or ensnare us in their talking. At a first meeting, for example, in a holiday camp at the swimming pool, newcomers are often asked by adults: How long have you been here? How long are you staying with us? Do you have children? What is your profession? Similar questions from children on the same occasion are never heard. They ask: Do you swim in the deep water? Can you make a loop in the water, like I do? Do you dare to make a header?

While adults often think in special lattices and act in conventional orders, children orient themselves toward concrete affairs, the concrete situation. They try to incorporate others into their activity, allowing the other to participate in their own life.

There is some sort of clairvoyance in understanding the expressions of children. On the one hand, adults normally have forgotten the magic dimensions of the world. They do not suffer from their panelvisions, especially if everything is in order. On the other hand, we are able to understand children because we are sharing realms in the tissue of our world. In the process of establishing forms of life and forms of speaking, several orders of knowledge and practice arise.

Note, however, that this by no means signifies that the new arises in a kind of primal-creation which owes nothing to the old. Every production is *also* a re-production, and every new formation signifies a “coherent deformation” of preexistent structures. (Waldenfels, 1982, p. 34)

We are sharing the twilight of reason if we take care of our acts of deformation, of our secret use of a kaleidoscope. There is no sense behind the things; there exists no order behind our concrete world; there is no night of identity and no sunshine-state of reason that we can reach. So, if we learn to listen to the expressions of children in their productive sense, we do learn something about ourselves, because to learn something like imagination in listening to other orders of reason means that you find a remedy against a special problem of Western Reason, which has unlearned to dream because of her insomnia. This insomnia is caused by the ideal of a sunshine-state of reason. But this is no humane rationality—neither for a child nor for an adult.

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