

FRENCH SHOPPING

noun

UK / frenʃ ˈʃɒp.ɪŋ / US /frenʃ ˈʃɑː.pɪŋ/

shoplifting – An inseparable part of French culture – A legend says that French supermarkets are taking thefts into consideration by adding the monthly loss by theft to the prices of the products in store. Which makes sense, doesn't it? ¹

¹Urban Dictionary: *French shopping*. (2020). Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=French%20shopping>

IN THESE PAGES, WE WILL FIND NO VICTIM, NEITHER GUILTY

OR SAINT, MARTYR OR REVOLUTIONARY HEROINE.2



Dear Reader,

Imagine you are walking toward a store.
You have a couple of minutes to wonder:

"Am I a shopper? Am I a shoplifter?"

As you step into the shop, if you step into the role of a shoplifter, you walk against the course of the conventional shopping process: where ordinary rules ask people to pay, you play! For a minute, you feel like a beginner who might forget their whole script. Your body is invited to dance with stress as those around you become *could-be-cops*, tomatoes appear as watchdogs of the grocery store and chocolate bars weigh heavier than copper in your pockets. But paranoia is just an instant, after which – seeing a spike I taped for you on the floor in this theatre – you remember the whole rehearsal. A prompt runs to remind your body's joints their choreography. "Tension is there, as an essential part of the game. Its outcome being drawn by luck and uncertainty!"³

³ Huizinga, J. (2014). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Martino Fine Books.

You deal with the hyper-surveilled, *I-can-see-you-wherever-you-are* world. Your sharp retinas versus this world sets the tone of the play: you envision the grid of cameras hanging from the ceiling. You see them, they see you, do they watch you? No clue. Considering the type of camera, remember that the images must be highly pixelated, making it difficult for them to see whether you carry a bag of rice or a baby. The security guard is probably bored after ten minutes behind the surveillance screen, so unless you make a very suspicious gesture, you can start shoplifting. Withdrawing from the rules and rejecting the usual norms, you start to move smoothly. If you meet a comrade on the stage, you might feel the sensation of being apart together, it's a splendid position of sharing a temporary secret. Together, you undress goods from their commercial value, that boring costume from the market: a trout with almonds tastes so much better when its ingredients are pilfered!

As you dance in the aisle, with pleasure you see your skin becoming translucent, soon your limbs are transparent, the other customers now cross your body without noticing you. You're immersed within your character, just as Jean Genet, who carried an immense tenderness for shoplifters, thieves and his desirable criminals. "The slightest signs of presence around you are absorbed in your being, within you, transforming this body into an object of absolute presence."⁴

⁴ Genet, J., & Frechtman, B. (1994). *The Thief's Journal* (Reissue ed.). Grove Press.

While shoplifting, there is no room for groping gestures: “...Society is much more lenient to the cheat than to the realist.”⁵ Cheats, even by manipulating the rules to serve themselves, still respect the theatre of society, whereas realists might seek to smash the whole play-world and create a new one. People on the stage of conventional society might have forgotten it, but they are also playing: if there are winners and losers, it’s a game! “As gameplay demands rules and absolute order”⁶ so winners must follow laws, codes and morals, which lay behind so many gates. Defended by cops.

“The real cops, your cops, other people’s cops, our adversaries’s cops, the cop in our head. The game is a penitentiary camp with its own borders between what is good and what is bad, between what serves it and what deserves it, what’s permitted and what’s forbidden. We are all cops in a game which keeps running.”⁷ As shoplifters, we play and we know we play! Play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun, is profoundly aesthetic, it spreads like an ornament: “...In its more developed forms it’s saturated with rhythm, harmony and tension, the noblest gift of perception given to us.”⁸

⁵ Huizinga, J. (2014). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Martino Fine Books. ⁶ Idem

⁷ Despentes, V. *Lecture Despentes - Séminaire Paul B. Prédiado*. (16 oct. 2020)

⁸ Huizinga, J. (2014). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Martino Fine Books.

You are wearing a long dark coat, dressed up, disguised by your character, you perfectly demonstrate the theatrical nature of play. For the audience in the shop to remain unaware, your clothes are clean, potential stains on your arms are hidden under long black sleeves. Wandering in the aisles, following your cart, you will stop in the breakfast department. With the utmost seriousness, absorption and devotion, you grasp a pack of expensive coffee.

I observe your choreography.

Such a grasp requires from you an obscene amount of movement, “each appears as sharp as the faces of a diamond.”⁹I wrote those steps for you. I look away for an instant and you lose my lead, your fingers slip and you drop the coffee which falls on the floor. My mistake! As the author, it’s so difficult to release you from my hold, my vision.

You crouch to pick up the pack, bounce back.

Remember the first day we stood up. In evolution, long before shopping centres, we became upright beings and our hands thus freed from the earth were able to become the most marvellous instruments. As Orwell stresses, “The distinguishing mark of man is the hand, the instrument with which he does all his mischief.”¹⁰Now disconnected from the ground,

⁹ Genet, J., & Frechtman, B. (1994). *The Thief's Journal* (Reissue ed.). Grove Press.
¹⁰ Orwell, G., & Blair, E. (2021). *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*. Albatross Publishers.

they encounter an endless landscape of play. Your hands are two, already a team, and together they cheat, trick, grasp and manipulate. Never far from each other, they work fast. "Seducing monsters, their insatiable craving, their endless curiosity, subverts any order."¹¹

Once they've found a target-to-be-pilfered in the shopping-world, your hands start moving in different directions. The left heads towards a target, the right – working together with your gaze – grasps a distracting bait. Your right hand and gaze pretend that focus should be where they meet. It's bait for the surveilling retinas, for this pair of eyes sitting in a grey room somewhere at the first floor of this building, potentially watching. But the real target? Your left hand has already dropped it into your pocket.

Your hands get carried away by the game, and as the game is often unproductive, in this shop you are subversive! You observe the network of copper optic nerves running against the ceiling that connect the surveilling eyes and control the shop. From underneath, your hands dominate their play-world, hardly ever at rest, "they grasp, they grasp for its own sake."¹² The hands have accumulated goods in your multiple pockets to create a sort of costume from our customer culture; you now look as though you are dressed by the consumer landscape,¹³ adorned with all kinds of pilfered objects, blowing up your coat, extending your sleeves, and pulling down your hoody.

¹¹Flusser, V., & Roth, N. A. (2014). *Gestures*. Univ Of Minnesota Press.

¹² Idem. ¹³ Gauckler, G., Fréger, C., & Wilson, M. R. (2012). *Wilder Mann* (First Edition). Dewi Lewis Publishing.

Walking outside, the security guard approaches you. He wants to see what's in your pockets.

-“They are full” you say, stopping briefly.

“Full of skills metamorphosed into pilfered things.

Full of my ability to play and disagree.

Full of pleasure-to-come, when, with my friends, we will spread what's in them, onto the dinner table.”

He takes you by the arm, you shake his hand.

You speak, proposing him to meet as two players of the same game:

“I don't mind whether or not shoplifting is

'objectively' right. It is a shortcut in this gameplay, a breach which speaks of survival. In this game, as

a security guard, seeking security, you follow

the conventional steps, docile: a job to get money,

to get food, to survive. Do you think you need us,

a couple of shoplifters in your maze, to keep the job?”

Describing the feeling and choreography of pilfering, I begin to understand how necessary and valuable shoplifters are. Maybe in them I can find rough shapes, archetypal gestures of subversive bodies, the inspiration to raise for them a monument in public space. To build a statue on the pedestal of joyful rebellion¹⁴, celebrating shoplifters as splendid characters among our heroes.

I searched through multiple biographies to find my heroine, and became infatuated with a couple of thieves... I thought of Robin Hood: the good thief, Alexandre Marius Jacob (♠): the anarchist burglar, Shirley Sally Pitts (♀): the British queen of shoplifters, Jean Genet (♁): lover of all thieves. And from the animal kingdom, a coyote? The trickster of so many myths and tales, and any animal known for being a thief: hyenas, grackles, crows, ravens, and other birds. But as Rachel Shteir points out in her book *The Steal*: "there are no malls in the Animal Kingdom (🐾), so there is no shoplifting."¹⁵ For shoplifting to exist, we first need the shop.

¹⁴ Montgomery, N., Bergman, C., & Alluri, H. (2017). *Joyful Militancy*. Amsterdam University Press.

¹⁵ Shteir, R. (2011). *The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting* (First Edition). Penguin Press.

(**Alexandre Marius Jacob** (September 29, 1879 – August 28, 1954), was a French anarchist illegalist. A clever burglar equipped with a sharp sense of humour. In 1900 he organized a band of wo/men: “*les travailleurs de la nuit*” (“*the workers of the night.*”) Principles were simple: one does not kill, except to protect their life and their freedom from the police; one steals only from those considered to be social parasites—bosses, judges, soldiers, and the clergy—but never from the professions considered useful—architects, doctors, artists, etc. A percentage of the stolen money was to be invested into the anarchist cause. Jacob chose to avoid working with the idealistic anarchists and instead surrounded himself with criminals and fellow illegalists.

◉ **Shirley Sally Pitts** later Shirley Sally Hawkins (24 November 1934 – 16 March 1992), was an English fraudster and thief known as the “*queen of shoplifters*”. Born into poverty and crime, she began to steal as a child to feed her siblings. She was educated in shoplifting by the ‘Forty Elephants’ (an 18th to 20th century all-female London crime syndicate who specialised in shoplifting). This gang was notable for its longevity and skill in avoiding police detection), and later diversified into other non-violent crime such as fraud. Lorraine Gamman wrote a thesis mainly based on Shirley’s experience (*Discourses on women and shoplifting: a critical analysis of why female crime mythologies past and present operate to legitimate the incompatibility between female gender roles and the idea of women as active agents of crime* (1999)).

⌘ **Jean Genet** (19 December 1910 – 15 April 1986) was a French criminal and social outcast. For misdemeanors, including repeated acts of vagrancy, he was sent at the age of 15 to Mettray Penal Colony. In *Miracle of the Rose* (1946), he gives an account of this period of detention, which ended at the age of 18 when he joined the Foreign Legion. He was eventually given a dishonorable discharge on grounds of indecency and spent a period as a vagabond, petty thief and prostitute across Europe—experiences he recounts in *The Thief’s Journal* (1949). After returning to Paris, France in 1937, Genet was in and out of prison through a series of arrests for theft, use of false papers, vagabondage, lewd acts, and other offences. In prison, Genet wrote his first poem, *Le condamné a mort*, which he had printed at his own cost, and the novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1944).

🐾 All over Europe, throughout the middle-ages and right on into the 19th century, animals were, as it turns out, tried for human crimes. Dogs, pigs, cows, rats and even flies and caterpillars were arraigned in court on charges ranging from murder to obscenity. The trials were conducted with full ceremony: evidence was heard on both sides, witnesses were called, and in many cases the accused animal was granted a form of legal aid—a lawyer being appointed at the tax-payer’s expense to conduct the animal’s defence. Evans, E. P. (1906). *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*. The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd.

🐭 **The Pied Piper of Hamelin** is the character of a legend from the town of Hamelin (Hameln), Germany. The legend dates back to the Middle Ages, it tells about a piper, dressed in multicolored (“pied”) clothing, who was a rat-catcher hired by the town to lure rats away with his magic pipe. When the citizens refuse to pay for this service as promised, he retaliates by using his instrument’s magical power on their children, leading them away as he had the rats.

Shoplifting as ;

*...an institution and a cultural category is extremely important in department store culture. As a step in our training to be a good customer, we need the counter-image of the incorrect consumption. Incorrect consumption also legitimises its opposite—the right way to consume. To become a moral and civilised consumer, you must be aware of the negative counterpart, and shoplifting plays a useful role in this conceptual world.*¹⁶

The structure of the word shoplifting proposes a playful image: “‘Lifting’, once laying alongside the word ‘shop’, becomes a rather poetic metaphor.”¹⁸ It draws something closer to magic, rather than evoking a criminal act. Objects in a shop, one after each other, shyly start to rise, following a few meters behind the shoplifter as they leave the store. They are in a state of levitation, a swarm of objects with a dancing attitude. In French – my mother tongue – the translation of shoplifting is *vol a l’etalage* (theft on the stall), a clear expression of criminal status; whereas in English, the name ‘shoplifter’ seems to be ornamented with the hypnotic power of the Pied Piper (♫). They find themselves capable of levitating whole stores and the goods within them, to be then singled out as a thief, accused of stealing.

¹⁶ Fredriksson, C. (1997). *The making of a swedish department store culture*. In P. Falk, & C. Campbell (Eds.), *The shopping experience*. SAGE Publications Ltd
¹⁸ Thesis. *Discourse on women and shoplifting*. (1999). Lorraine Gamman.

Is it necessary to emphasise that stealing and shoplifting are two different things? Although we dream of that ideal supermarket run by a family who know the name of their dear customers and kindly tell them that they've noticed their new hair cut, those places rarely exist outside of novels. Entering a grocery store, you might find some leftover artefact supporting the myth of the neighbourhood shop; 'local' food in wooden baskets, the apron of the seller slightly tarnished by soil, but they almost all shine under the tungsten neon lights of a few big companies. When the economy squeezes in between all sections of a society, and the empire of ever-expanding mass consumption digests the local owners, 'free' is an antidote to this financial sickness.

Outside, I seek out the ideal spot for my monument, and stopping on a small square, I begin to cast a woman on a pedestal. I choose a female form, because "shoplifting started in department stores and these spaces have their history tightly bound with female customers." ¹⁹ For weeks I had searched for her. In plaster, plastic, fabric, stone, wood, I finally found her, hidden in a deep muddy-grey clay. She had hundreds of hands, legs, arms, necks, feet, straight out of a game of exquisite corpse ²⁰ she stands.

¹⁹Idem. ²⁰ *Cadavre Exquis*: a collective game invented by the surrealists: A. Breton, Y. Duhamel, J. Prévert, Y. Tanguy. It is a way to make pieces of drawings or texts from successively added fragments on a folded piece of paper. Each player ignoring the previous fragments. The text/drawing appears when the games is ended and the paper unfolded..

I dressed her in a long, waterproof, double-buttoned, heavy-duty drill trench coat, which I moulded in bronze *cire-perdue*²¹ with a gold leaf patina. This process left micro, brown, almond-like marks all over my forearms, burned by the melted metal. The removable insulating lining, appearing at the coat's bottom whenever her leg steps forward, reveals the secrecy of her far-too-deep pockets, highlighted by the rain that stains the un-patinated copper green. We can now see the bold secrecy of her clothes. With embroidery, I paid extra attention to the passepoil of her left waist pocket, pointed at by her index finger to show us "her instrument of empowerment."²² Neither poor nor rich, she can contain a whole landscape under her coat and samples at will the objects of her desire, freely assembling them. The unlabelled world disclosed in her skilled hands can finally be unveiled by a sculpture, a well-deserved pedestal. With the confidence of her affirmed gestures she appears to be choreographed, and with her unabashed attitude, she becomes a statue capable of moving at will through the city.

²¹ *Lost-wax*: a process of metal casting in which a molten metal is poured into a mold that has been created by means of a wax model. Once the mold is made, the wax model is melted and drained away. A hollow core can be effected by the introduction of a heat-proof core that prevents the molten metal from totally filling the mold. The lost-wax method dates from the 3rd millennium BC and has sustained few changes since then. (britannica.com)

²² Burman, B., & Fennetaux, A. (2020). *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660–1900*. Yale University Press.

I was consumed with passion for her. She had been tightly corseted in polite femininity; this disguise – a pretend character – carried her easily outside of social bonds, outside the stores without paying. Repudiating the virtuous rules of our world, she set new ones, never governed by a feeling of rebellion or injustice (those just stand by her sides), she plays: and we silently agree that her realm should remain a forbidden one.

Such a language is not written down.

It is danced.

It is played.

It is whispered into ears.

Together with her, I wander through the city. With no goal, we stroll through the streets, defiantly against the constant *spectacle*,²³ master of all our dreams and desires. I walk, she walks, we walk (we also wait, sometimes). We walk together, not far from each other. It's only for the purpose of putting one foot after another, after another. Our '*walk*' is not going anywhere, it becomes a figure. As if hiking in the mountains, this '*Walk*' crosses the city. Walk takes the stairs, beats the pavement, wanders around parks. Slow, following no path, only hunches.

²³ From the definition of Debord. A term developed in his book "*The Society of the Spectacle*" (1967) which denounce the everyday manifestation of capitalist-driven phenomena: advertising, television, film, and celebrity and is a prescient indictment of our image-saturated consumer culture. Debord defines the spectacle as the "autocratic reign of the market economy."

In Paris, in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*),²⁴ Emile Zola describes the new born institution of mass consumption as a seducing monster; where one lets themselves be devoured by materialism and greed. "It gives its clientele the store they never knew they wanted",²⁵ transforming "shopping from a necessary function to a spectacle of consumption",²⁶ and we watch Madame de Boves, a respected customer from the store, be nabbed: thrown to the shameful opprobrium of the public gaze. Such stores, as represented in *Ladies' Paradise*, have participated in hosting and gendering petty theft.

I would have enjoyed a bit more fantasy in the writing of Zola. Delicate, his book is an endless description of tonalities of colours, textures, and lights, but it's a pain to read. He could have borrowed – to adorn his descriptions – the expertise on colours and stripes of Michel Pastoureau, and some punishment practices from the history of men, so easily available as they are the quintessence of human creativity. And suddenly, through the words of Zola and Pastoureau, we could have seen Mrs de Boves arrayed in stripes, dressed in *The Devil's Clothes*.²⁷

"Striped garments are a medieval coquetterie reserved for the outcasts, the thieves, a depreciative signal attracting attention to transgressive individuals, visually defining a social taxonomy."²⁸ Her darkly elegant and discrete silhouette, for the pleasure of the public gaze, would have been attacked by a bastion of white lines.

²⁴ Zola, É. (2020). *The Ladies' Paradise* (French Edition): *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Independently published.²⁵ Hennessy, S. (2008). Consumption and Desire in "Au Bonheur des Dames". *The French Review*, 81(4), 696-706. Retrieved January 6, 2021.²⁶ Idem. ²⁷ Pastoureau, M. (1991). *The Devil's Clothes*. Editions du Seuil.²⁸ Idem.

This sign of shame which scares us onto the straight path, ensures that we remain in our places and do not become lawless, fearless and shameless. She would have attempted to run away, *la bourgeoise* de Zola, but the stripes, as a surface structure are in constant movement; always they fly, no target can escape them for very long.

*"Veste, quad ex duobus texta est, non indueris..."*²⁹
(You will not wear upon yourself a garment that is made of two...)

Inevitably the stripes would catch her, wrap her, make Mrs de Boves their prisoner, and with such a get-up, she would step out of her class and be forced into the cage of the discriminated. Together with the leper, the prostitute, and the clown, she would wear her condemnation as a coat.

Then Zola, if he were eager for spectacle, considering the obvious pleasure he derived from marvellous depictions, might have been inspired by the *Pittura Infamante*. In his text, a couple of painters would be hired and ordered to portray Mrs de Boves, the criminal, in gigantic dimensions on the facade of the *Ladies' Paradise*, hung by foot, arse above face, in a more than demeaning position. A pig beside her, a fat pig that sullies her. Punitive shame is an exercise that belongs to the public space.

²⁹ S. Thomas Aquitanis (1760). *Summa totius theologiae*. doctoris angelici. Generic.

Between the XIII and XVI centuries, using *Pittura Infamante*, a genre of defamatory paintings, Italian governments of city-states commissioned artists to submit criminals to public condemnation in cases where no legal remedy was available. They were both a form of municipal justice and forensic art, also a medium for internal political struggles. Only sketches of this practice exist today, the paintings having all be erased by time.

The painters' scaffolding put up in front of the masses, standing against the building like gallows, publicly announces that one would soon have their honour and dignity beheaded, sending the crowd into a frenzy. Who cared if they were heroes or criminals, if they were the main character of a splendid spectacle? The cheerful mob would throw the big lady into humiliation and she would fall into total decline. One after the other, the communal buildings of the city would have found themselves decorated with obscenely scaled paintings, depicting the disgraced. As in Italy, the public edifices of Paris were also ornamented with its prestigious shoplifters and other tricksters. The rain, more tender than the public, would wash away the portraits before the crowds had given up their shaming.

But Zola does not write such things, he only lets us know that for him, "shoplifting is not a moral problem but rather a social one:"³¹ exhibitionism, abundance, merchandise, and temptation together cannot lead to anything but pilfering. Mrs de Boves will, thanks to her wealthy status, certainly be diagnosed as a kleptomaniac, victim of her "instinctive, irresistible propensity to

³⁰ Hennessy, S. (2008). *Consumption and Desire in "Au Bonheur des Dames"*. The French Review, 81(4), 696-706. Retrieved January 6, 2021

steal,"³¹to discreetly slide laces into her tie-on pocket. "Women's apparel and the detachability of their pockets may seem characteristic of a more uncertain, elastic relationship to things."³² Although on that day she set her pocket in an unusual place to avoid detection if searched, she was still caught.

Together, my casted archetype and I walk along the banks of the water, abandoning Mrs de Boves in front of The *Ladies' Paradise* with a couple of cops. The hundred hands of my friend, autonomous, grasp here and there multiple goods, delicious food. Hidden pockets hide a capacious interior, an inner capacity to contain portable possessions. Through her hands, in her pockets, she desacralises money and goods: they are worthless.

But my graceful *amie*, from gold and copper dressed, was attracting too many gazes. Shoplifting is a dangerous game that has its watchdogs. Having accumulated goods in her multiple pockets as a sort of costume from the customer culture, she now looks as though she is dressed by the consumer landscape, adorned with all kinds of pilfered objects, blowing up her coat, extending her sleeves and pulling down her hoody, it's all weighted down by the addition of so many sideline gazes. Where she is visible, each glance from the people stains her. Marked.

Mon *amie*, my archetype does not care but I do. She keeps wandering. In my fear, I see myself falling, hiding deep in her pockets, spanning one after the other

³¹ Marc, C.C.H. (1838) ³² Burman, B., & Fennetaux, A. (2020). *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660–1900*. Yale University Press.

the lines drawn by laws, morals and money. Crossing so loudly the layers, tearing the lining of that golden trench coat. I find myself visible again, in this shameful position, tripping over the carpet of justice, facing my own morals, searching for justification, desperately trying to gather the pieces of copper – now so green – to return her to her most marvellous infamy.

I committed so many mistakes with the simple desire to offer her a pedestal in public space, wrapping her in such a shiny outfit. Gold and copper, even if washed away in a kind of verdigris, cannot adorn shoplifters. The essence of their character lays not under the gazes in public space, but in the shadows, through their potential invisibility. They dress the norm until caught and revealed to the public, then, they must wear the garb of convicts. She belongs to the realm of darkness, and only there she can move, “not in accordance with the rules of morality but in accordance with certain laws of a fictional aesthetic which makes her to be restless, invisible, though a powerful character.” 33

Today I’m sick, and the long walk outside in the cold certainly didn’t help. I’m reminded of Johanna Hedva’s thoughts on sickness; 34 “...In Native American Cree language, the possessive noun and verb of a sentence are structured differently than in English. So in Cree, one does not say, ‘I am sick.’ Instead, one says, ‘The sickness has come to me.’” 35

I love that.

33 Genet, J., & Frechtman, B. (1994). *The Thief's Journal*. Grove Press.

34 The central question of Sick Woman Theory is: How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed? In this text, Johanna Hedva is Answering to Hannah Arendt's definition of the political – which is still one of the most dominant in mainstream discourse – as being any action that is performed in public, we must contend with the implications of what that excludes. If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed a-political – simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street. 35 Hedva, J. (2015). *Sick Woman Theory*. Maskmagazine.com. <http://www.maskmagazine.com/notagain/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.

So a flu has come to me, it disturbs the sensations of my body. Like rats, or contemporaries of the XVIII century, who placed smell at the top of the hierarchical pyramid of senses, I am usually woken up by the nose. Odours are my first daily encounter with the world. I feel, in each inhale, millions of particles vacuumed unfailingly – without any possibility to escape – into a conic-like shape whose summit is my flaring nostrils. They end up crashing down against the walls of my nasal cavity. Piling. Gathering.

This is how I usually meet my surroundings and its inhabitants, how we are introduced to each other. But today the sickness has come to me, and I have to encounter the world differently. It began yesterday with headaches, and I woke up this morning with all the other symptoms: muscle soreness, fever, chills, and weakness. I consider the last as a potential symptom of my body-state growing older.

*Illness is night side of life. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.*³⁶

As a hiatus in our constantly gone time, I mostly enjoy, to a certain extent, being sick. Schedule, layered as

³⁶Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness As Metaphor* (1st ed.). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

a lasagne of must-do tasks, explodes, finding itself erased. When I overuse the word « must » about things I do, my body exercises its veto.

Tabula Rasa.

Unable to work, I feel well. So many times, relatives and friends have dedicated themselves to taking care of me, and so many times I have brought them soup in their bed. Even though I cannot taste with sickness, it is delightful to receive, and when I can prepare soup for them, it feeds me to satiety. The sickness has come to me and I give in to myself this time.

*“Don’t need to be fixed, my queens—
it’s the world that needs the fixing.”³⁷*

When I was young, my mother used a mercury thermometer which I would keep in my mouth under the tongue. “It takes your temperature” she explained to me. After she removed the thermometer I was still sick, and this I didn’t understand. Confused by the sentence “taking the temperature”, I believed that a temperature was something you had only when you were sick, that it was a graspable entity. I assumed that the role of the thermometer, filled with a silver liquid laying under your tongue, would be to magically remove a temperature – and therefore sickness – from your body. I loved the contact of this cold glass against my teeth, a sensation so different to any other part of your body. I was waiting, laying on the sofa under a pile of covers. My mother had an eye on the clock. I moved the thermometer like a pendulum

³⁷Hedva, J. (2015). Sick Woman Theory. Maskmagazine.com. <http://www.maskmagazine.com/no-tagain/struggle/sick-woman-theory>

with my tongue, from left, to right, to left. Always the same rituals and I was still sick.

Later, I realised that in this case, the meaning of the verb "*to take*" is very close to the meaning of the verb "*to give*". To give an information, to give a state. My sickness was just a given information, a message about the state of my body: unbalanced from the usual, I felt shit. I had some stigmas on my skin, on my tongue, as the symptoms of cold, tiredness and stress. My sickness wasn't laying in the centimetre climbed by the mercury in the tube laying under my tongue, but was rather occupying my whole body; I was burning. Like a squatter being evicted, the sickness ascended into my throat, and this last step of the process remained the most painful. Understanding that the role of the thermometer was to give the level of my temperature, I deduced that the radiator in winter would be enough to trick my mother, let me spend a couple of extra days at home instead of school.

I think of shoplifters as a substance similar to mercury, as they bridge the gap between the meanings of '*taking*' and '*giving*', capable of taking goods while giving information. If such a practice would be regarded as a symptom, of poorness, tiredness or boredom, the social body might be considered sick, and the shoplifter, by taking, also gives a message, becoming mercury, signalling the degraded state of society.

In the aisle of a supermarket, the mercurial shoplifter slides some chocolate bars up their sleeves while whispering in your ear about how the world is turning into a mass advertising museum of subliminal pictures that infect (y)our desires. Besides the financial impossibility of those images that the *pseudo-luxurious-industrial-society* raises in front of your conk, they also create frustrations.

In a commercial gallery some golden earrings are dancing in the shoplifter's hands, jumping from one finger to the other: laughing, they remind you that poverty isn't a disease. If we were to search for a sick part on the immaculate monolith of capitalist society, we wouldn't find it. Because capitalism itself, with its rich people, is society's sickness, of which the poor are a symptom.
« *Y'a pas de bons riches!* » 38

Walking through the anti-theft gates, shoplifters do not stop when the alarm starts to scream. Even though advertising keeps trying to make us believe that consumers still have room to manoeuvre, that freedom is the power to choose between the cheapest and the least bad product, it always ends with your opened wallet. The alarm doors keep screaming, but they are gone, deciding that today, the rules were different for them. As the body of mercury miraculously expands and takes up more space in the tube when you are sick, so the shoplifters spread, multiply, denouncing a damaged state. What if there is no more space in the tube? It only takes one canary to suffocate from the colourless, odourless, carbon monoxide before the coal miners answer the signal by escaping the toxic atmosphere.

38 Bestion, M. (2019) 'There are not such a thing as good rich people!' (my translation)

How many canaries, how much mercury, poverty, do we need before we escape, take another direction?

I have a vivid memory of the day when the thermometer broke. Excited by mercury's reaction to heat, I dipped it into warmer and warmer liquids. As expected, my dad didn't like it; silver exploding on the wooden floor, amongst the small pieces of glass, unshaped, the super shiny bubble-like mercury.

*"Attention! C'est toxique!"*³⁹ said my mother.

We had to catch it. *Quicksilver* – what an appropriate name – kept escaping. Rolling on the floor, it ran away at each of our attempts. To avoid its toxicity spreading, my mother finally put a glass on top of it. Abandoning the fight, quicksilver looked like an insect, prowling in its cage.

Laying in my bed, still sick, I thought of mercury as an inspiring material for the statue since it is an element sensitive to temperature and pressure (those invisible phenomena). It's also the only metallic element that is liquid in everyday conditions – capable of filling breaches, it solidifies only under -38,80 degrees.

Mercury and the shoplifter, both responding to their environments, with or without our consideration, give an account of their surrounding atmospheres.

Expanding. Retracting. Mercury and the shoplifter also share the experience of eviction, the first phased out of clinical science for its toxicity, the second considered a pest character, a toxic component that society must

³⁹ "Careful! It's toxic!"

eradicate. As the capitalist system expands and protects itself, the grey area left for subversive bodies is forced to shrink.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm describes this transition in his book *Bandits* :

With economic development the rich and powerful are increasingly likely to see bandits as threats to property to be stamped out, rather than as one factor among others in the powergame. Under such circumstances bandits become permanent outcasts, their hand against every 'respectable' man. Perhaps at this stage the anti-mythology of banditry makes its appearance, in which the robber appears as the opposite of the hero, as—to use the terminology of Russian nobles at the end of the eighteenth century—'a beast in human form,'⁴⁰ "ready to profane all that is holy, to kill, to pillage, to burn, to violate the will of God and the laws of the State."⁴¹

I was searching for information about mercury when I found again my shoplifter, my quicksilver. Mercury in Roman mythology — *Hermes* in Greek — was "the god of shopkeepers, merchants, messages, travellers, luck, tricksters and thieves, he also serves as the guide of souls to the underworld."⁴² With this revelation I fell on my feet, I found myself mercury leaf patinated. Now galvanised, I could easily handle -38,80 degrees.

⁴⁰ Hobsbawm, E. J. (1969). *Bandits* (1st ed.). Delacorte Press.

⁴¹ Gonzalez, L. *Pueblo en vilo* (Mexico DF, 1968), p. 251.

⁴² britannica.co

There were times when one god, one character, could be a shared entity, just as Mercury was the common denominator of merchants and thieves. I continue my search in mythology for new perspectives, a way to understand what bridges the gap between merchants and thieves.

“A poly mythic thought capable of opening multiple solutions to experience,” ⁴³ cracking the mono-mythic sterile structure, shaking off the singular and the unique. Not immoral but amoral. Mercury the fast god of messages, who takes under his wing all the representatives of transaction, no matter their practices, velocity, fluidity, or transition. As the “the keeper of borders and boundaries”, he frees himself from respecting them, refusing binary systems.

I have chosen the mercury for casting her, but still with the sickness by my side, I cannot build the sculpture of my shoplifter. Days go on and the sickness is still with me, leaving on my body multiple marks. Tired, I embody the virus, incapable to do, make, or move at will. I grow unproductive, my rhythm adapting to my body’s mutations and its slow expulsion from the public and social sphere. *Stigma.*⁴⁴

The marks on my skin remind me of Michel Porret tracing the history of infamy, from the latin word ‘*infamia*’ and the penal scar. Used until the late XVIII century as a punitive practice reserved for illegal bodies, the scar was “the printing of a mark made as a consequence of a judgment, by the executor of the high

⁴³ Bettini, M., & Pirenne-Delforge, V. (2016). *Eloge Du Polytheisme: Ce Que Peuvent Nous Apprendre Les Religions Antiques* (French Edition) (1st ed.). Les Belles Lettres

⁴⁴ A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

justice, on the skin of the criminal who deserves an afflictive sentence, but not absolutely death."⁴⁵ Those penal scars – memories (en)graved as traces of their mischiefs – embodied the delinquent. Marked as such, they saw themselves slowly evicted from public and social spheres. Justice seems to have borrowed from biology the marking of bodies by time and disease, to build a discriminatory system: making the *homo criminalis*. As though, within their body lay the reasons for their illegal acts, mimicking the marks of a sick body, justice marks the *homo criminalis*, signalling them as a cause of a sick system, instead of as a consequence. "An afflictive sentence, a stigmatisation of the one whose body is signalled to public opprobrium."⁴⁶

Before administrative structures and technologies enabled paper records, for centuries justice had established a list of letters* and drawings to be inked on the skins of the people who deviate from a certain conception of society: marked as criminals, for justice and for the public.

*V from '*voleur*' (thief) would be tattooed on thieves in France. The recidivist would see their forehead ornamented with a second:

VV. *Un voleur est un voleur!*⁴⁷

It's hard to become a different character, if one is already written on their forehead. Thinking with Cree language again (from where sickness came to me), instead of

⁴⁵ Porret, M. (1998). *Le corps violenté: Du geste à la parole* (French Edition). Droz.

⁴⁶ Idem.

⁴⁷ "Once a thief, always a thief!"

saying "I am a criminal", we might say, "the crime has come to me." Becoming sentinel species, we might be intoxicated by our society. Ingesting the poisonous atmosphere and throwing it up: sickness a signal. Two centuries after the judicial system abandoned tattooing bodies, the ever-expanding business of security technologies reintroduced ink to their practice, the ink of shame. Ink was injected into the alarms protecting the clothes from shoplifters, an invention to equip retailers in the battle against the five-fingers discount.

Methylene blue ψ δ , an ink which has proven to be indelible, was previously used by surgeons to highlight the presence of sickness, or in orthopaedics to provide an easy discrimination between native bones and cement. Abandoned by medicine for its toxicity, it has found a resurgence in security. ψ η Visually tracing and discriminating, ink remains sentinel, exploding on hands, forearms, faces, cheeks, up to the eyes; who cares if the surveilled articles are destroyed, stained, if someone attempting to shoplift is caught?

ψ δ *SelectaDNA*, the last technology against burglaries and other thefts, was developed in 2004. It is a marking system used to 'tag' valuable property, infrastructure and criminals. *SelectaDNA* is a Police-approved Secured By Design product with no annual licence fees. What's used in is synthetic DNA that can be used to tie suspects to a particular place and time. Installed at points of entry and exit, the system works by spraying the perpetrator(s) with a fine mist dispensed from a canister. A high-tech version of the dye packs invented in the '60s, the spray marks the suspect(s) with an invisible, odorless substance that stays on their skin for 4-6 weeks and on clothing up to three months. If the suspect is taken into custody during that time, the mist will show up under a special frequency ultraviolet light and appear as blue stains. ψ η Here, about security, comes a question which has followed me all along the writing process of this thesis, but it would require a whole text to be explored. It started with the observation of the expansion of security infrastructures and criminalisation system. I wonder about the consequences on our society/us to treat the deviant bodies as we do? Security/criminalisation system is a powerful institution of stigmatisation. What is legal or illegal is dictated by institutions, and this legal frame has consequences on all of us (not equally though), either fitting the system or not. Before I deviate too much, I would like to make an analogy between the security system and colonisation by using a quote of Aimé CÉSAIRE in his discourse on colonialism: "They prove that colonisation, I repeat, dehumanises even the most civilised man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the coloniser, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonisation that I wanted to point out." In the same way colonisers legitimate the dehumanisation of the colonised, and the theft of cultural and territorial possessions; the security/criminalisation system legitimates the use of discrimination and violence, within a given territory, on the deviant bodies. Who are then the criminals and who has the legitimacy to designate them when corruption infiltrates all the layers of power, from the individual to the institutional?

With mercury, I have found a material with which to cast the statue, but I still face the problem of dressing her. If the anti-mythology of stores and justice identify shoplifters as toxic, with marks borrowed from sickness, I want to protect them. I will adorn them with textiles to absorb the poisonous substances that try to infect them: sideline gazes and the ink of shame.

My friend Joost enters my room, I'm in my sick bed, facing the ceiling, my hands and forearms are marked with beautiful deep blue stains and reflected in this smooth purple is the solution for the shoplifter's protective outfit. I'm fascinated by people whose skilled hands are able to read textures with their fingertips, and Joost is one of them. The way she touches fabrics, tells that she is questioning them. First the surface with the fingertips, then provoking the structure with her nail, a picture is often enough for her to recognise a textile.

Joost sits at the corner of my bed and together we read a few lines of *The steal—A cultural History of Shoplifting* which lays on my bedside table. On page 36, we meet Reth Wyman. Born at the end of the XVIII century, "he is a thieving Davy Crockett who crows about his meanness and his quick fingers as necessary skills to survive in the New World."⁵⁰ Bakeries, drygoods stores... He brought us to the shadowed territories of shoplifting. The only thing he once gave money for, he tells us, was a cloak" capacious enough to hold a small family and a pig. Nothing was valued by him unless he had succeeded in pilfering it."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Shteir, R. (2011). *The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting* (First Edition). Penguin Press.

⁵¹ Idem.

We get a bit lost in his stories within stories. There is some back and forth between his youth and his adult expertise of the five fingers discount, used on anything from a loaf of sugar to inches of cloth. He gained skills, he learned that any practice, even illegal, requires that its specific instruments are sharpened.

Seeking appropriate tools, he started to make some shoplifting clothes for himself. I was amazed and Joost found her technical freak touched, tenderly caressed by the trickster. Reth Wyman, that old man now deeply settled in his sofa, who spent an entire life expanding his shady skills, that law disregarded as a craft, now finds in us the necessary audience needed to enjoy his adventures again.

The truth is, we misunderstood. The story was actually something else. He never sewed himself shoplifting garments or any kind of hidden deep pocket. We were just enjoying the spectacle of a devoted-to-hiscraft man. The reality was, “a tailoress he seduced sewed him shoplifted cloth into garments.”⁵³ The idea, though, tickled me, and inspired the genius skills of Joost. We could make garments as tools! The tools of an artisan, a labyrinth for anybody but its owner. The body moves – *savoir-faires* – and garments accompany. As a tool, they sharpen the hand. Driven by the fingers, a confident gesture carries the object from the shelves to the coat, and the pilfered must then enter: pockets are born where the movement ends. Sleeves become the temporary host to an arm-like object, they already host one after all. Pockets meet the garment’s lining to form a huge container. The back also. “Who ever thought of checking hoodies and back

⁵²Idem.

pockets of a coat?" Joost starts to draw these garments with her body, she imagines loudly this wide sleeve in which we could easily slide some cookies, or even a cake. "You grasp one and the second disappears in your coat, just like that. It's just about the right movement." Sitting on the bed she raises her forearm, her hand moves forward to catch this invisible bag full of cookies. Together we escape from the bedroom, the house, and out into the world.

I like to consider boundaries as formed by morals, laws, and rules; as an elastic that frames conventional society. A flexible line that you can pull more than any other type of material: indeed, it's extremely stretchy but remains impossible to break. And once in a while, it snaps back, bringing you quite roughly into convention.

"It's not okay to make such clothes" says Joost, probably poked at by her morals: for an instant, the elastic forces her back, I have to wait. Taking a needle, I start to stitch pieces of fabric together. Joost again follows her train of thought, and from her words and movements, shoplifters' clothes appear. She extends her thinking, facing her boundaries, even though she wears thick jeans, the elastic is painful against her knees. I try to follow her with my needle, to transform her words and gestures into a coat. She is fast.

"Jeans for the fabric? Leather for sure. Any thick fabric? You should also weave aluminium, doesn't it stop the alarms when you cross the antithefts gates?"

She wonders out loud whether the weaving grid would be enough to scramble the radio system, stopping the article from emitting any signal when crossing the anti-theft gates. "Maybe sheets of aluminium is a better option, then we've to consider that the appearance of this jacket remains unsuspecting."

Listening to her, I add a couple of sheets in the pockets of the coat to isolate them from radio waves. It's taking shape, the coat's body appears. Focused on her words, I don't look at what my hands are sewing; they follow Joost, who stops for a moment to see the work in process. Still attached to the needle's thread, we see the long, waterproof, double buttoned, heavy-duty drill trench coat. Its body is cream with gold stripes. The removable insulating lining appearing at the bottom of the coat is offwhite, stained of blue. We find the colours inappropriate. Light, thin clothes are the privilege of the honest people; they reveal their mysteries, and any convex volume inside would project its own shadow on the fair fabric. Grid patterns, stripes, might be broken by shapes intended to be hidden, volumes bombing the surface of the clothes in undesirable ways. Only black and navy blue, like the bruises of my illness, can solve this. We prepare a dark bath for this coat, full of dye, in which we watch the garment disappear.

Waiting for the coat to dry, Joost opens a *Vintage Menswear*⁵³ book. We leaf through each scan of sportswear, workwear or military clothing, observing how activities inform garments.

⁵³ Gun, D., & Ruckett, R. (2014). *VINTAGE MENSWEAR*. Green forest..

Most are beautifully stained, holed, and sewn up. We wonder what their pockets were full of. How were they stained? Only the garments made of repellent fabric, slippery surfaces, seem to have forgotten their past. Watching her turn the pages, I realise that some of the activities attached to those clothes are no longer practiced. They sank into oblivion. What if the ever growing surveillance business of *you-try-to-steal-I-will-catch-you* reaches its pretended purpose, and washes from society its toxic elements? What if people stop shoplifting? In medicine, mercury has been substituted by an electronic system. In the coal mines, the 'electronic nose'⁵⁴ took the place of the canary's signal. If all shoplifters, as sentinel species, are evicted without alternative, our capacity to see their signals, to detect social toxicity and the oppression of capitalism, might decline, too.

The coat is dry and I put it on. Wearing it, I can feel Mercury: the god of thieves wears me. He is there "in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles that in the technical jargon of sewing are called 'memory'; he is there in the stains of the very bottom of the jacket."⁵⁵ The pondering of Joost about shoplifting, together with my listening to her moral dilemma, built a garment for shoplifters. We bathed its impossible colours in darkness, to hide its stripes, a persecuted stained past. Letting it live in its shadowed realm, only we know its secrets, which might be seen in its fartoo- deep pockets.

⁵⁴ Nationwide - Pit Animals. (1981). Bbc.Co.Uk. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/nationwide--pitanimals/z62f2sg> ⁵⁵ Butler, J. (2019). *The Open Mesh*. Freud.Org.Uk. <https://www.freud.org.uk/2019/05/30/theopenmesh/>

I have to leave Joost and our revelations to pursue my infatuation: the effects of shoplifting, not whether or not it is '*objectively*' right or wrong. Lying, tricking, cheating, are sometimes needed to keep our sentinel species alive. Walking outside, in my excitement, I stop at the first square and start to cast the sculpture. Out of Mercury, I make my shoplifter, bringing the winter nights of the coldest country, when temperature is at its lowest. Only now can she have her body shaped, standing still for a couple of nighttime hours. My hands turn cold blue, becoming sentinel, signalling the unbearable atmosphere. She is born in the darkest frozen realm, where so few bodies can survive. She must escape, from the moment of her birth, as soon as she stands, since the society that made her hunts her as a shameful bastard.

On her shoulder I put the coat, the cloak of shamelessness under which, like all good trickster characters from mythology, she knows no bounds, and refuses to behave in accordance with anyone's laws. The garment Joost and I made for her transforms her, hiding her from hunters. I sit beside her for an hour and we watch the horizon turning navy, grey, silver; dawn, white, gold; morning. People in the street see her, touched by the sun's first rays, reaching the temperature of -38.80 degrees, she cries quicksilver, her skin finds back its toxicity as her hunters begin to take notice. Her body increases in brilliance, becoming heavy liquid metal, she reflects her surroundings. Falling from the head to the feet, leaking from her pedestal, in bubbly reflections of her skin people look monstrous. Intense silver, sparkling beautifully, still for an instant, she mirrors society, stands, then disappears. She injects herself into cracks and with her body she enters a grey area. Passers by might happen to walk on her: *under the paving stones, the mercury!* ⁵⁶

⁵⁶ « Sous les pavé, la plage » {Under the paving stone, the beach} May 1968.

