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**PSYCHOANALYSIS, BIOPOLITICS, AND
THE ETHICS OF ADDICTED DESIRE**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by

Blaise Bayno

June 2022

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2022

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Abstract

Psychoanalysis, Biopolitics, and the Ethics of Addicted Desire

Blaise Bayno

This thesis examines the addict as an ontological, medical, and aesthetic category in the context of psychoanalysis, biopolitics, and cinema. Organized in two parts consisting of distinct but thematically conversing papers, I offer a reading of the addict as an ethical subject of desire. The first paper, entitled "Mastering Death, Rejecting the Future: The Peculiar Sovereignty of the Addict," investigates what it is about addiction that engenders strong and conflicting views and media representations. In this paper, I contend that anxieties regarding the addict's attempts at mastering death by closely encountering it explain biopolitical modalities of addiction rhetoric and policy. By exposing the similarities between the addict and Foucault's *homo economicus*, I argue that the addict's disruptive social and political impact stems from a refusal to valorize longevity/futurity and the self-administration of *jouissance*. The second paper, entitled "*Leaving Las Vegas* and the Ethics of Addiction," takes this line of inquiry to a specific cultural text, the 1995 film *Leaving Las Vegas*. By parsing the intricacies of the film's unique addiction narrative, I reveal the ethics of desire, what Jacques Lacan calls "the ethical act" at the heart of the protagonist's, Ben Sanderson's, story. I frame the discussion with psychoanalytic film theory, which studies film as a collective dream where a culture's repressed fantasies emerge. *Leaving Las Vegas* tells a story of an addict whose singular desire is allowed to exist as it is and illustrates the often-unrecognized ethical structure of addicted desire.

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The road to this thesis has been long and immensely challenging but ultimately proved just as rewarding. Though I began this project with the intent to write a doctoral dissertation, the impacts of Covid-19, isolation, political exploration and consistent difficulties in the academy led me to complete a Master's instead. A year after completing my undergraduate degree, I entered this program and had so much more to discover about myself and my desires. I chose sobriety in April 2018, the spring of my first year in graduate school. This decision, brought on by numerous unpleasant events, led me to the topic of this thesis. Be that as it may, I want to thank my family of recovered addicts for their strength and courage. I thank my advisor Carla who has supported my change of plans, and my reading committee Kimberly Lau and Bob Meister, for accepting my last-minute decision and helping me succeed. Thank you to my boyfriend, Pate, who has listened to countless teary nights as I pondered this decision and struggled with writing. Thank you to my rabbits, Blu and Clyde, for your silent and whimsical witness. And of course, the deepest, inarticulable love and thanks to Mary and Hal, who, despite the initial shock, are my biggest supporters in this decision and all that I've ever made. I am so grateful for these past years; I would not have learned who I am without them.

Introduction

One of my clearest memories from childhood is sitting on the floor next to my couch while my Mother reclined on it, high on heroin. I do not recall precisely why, but she proceeded to ask me if I'd like to try some. I said no without hesitation, but not because I had a firm moral conviction about her drug use, only because I was seven years old and such things were of no interest to me. A year later, when I was in college, I got a chance to try it. Ironically and luckily, it was an unpleasant experience. I felt nauseous and nothing more. I enjoyed uppers better.

My Mother and my Father met in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. They never married and were separated even before my birth. He remained sober; my Mother was not as fortunate. My Grandfather was an alcoholic but got sober long before I was a thought, and my Grandmother, too, an alcoholic whose sobriety long predates my existence. My Mother has three siblings, two of them are sober alcoholics/addicts, and one has never had any substance issues. I have a brother 11 years my senior who used heroin alongside my Mother and tried every drug. He is currently diagnosed with schizophrenia. My Mother is now eight years sober and a devoted Catholic. I have not seen or spoken to my dad for 14 years, but I know he is sober and has a new family. My family tree is not the topic of this thesis, but, in many ways, it also is. Addiction was one of the first concepts I was familiar with and was the most profoundly impactful. When I moved in with my Aunt and Uncle after my Mother's arrest, I began middle school. When I lied or disobeyed the rules, I was punished and warned that if I continued to get into trouble, I'd become an addict like my Mother; it was my genetic

destiny. My Aunt told me this story of predetermination throughout high school and college. It only fueled my desire to prove the story fallacious. I wanted to be able to use drugs and party while maintaining good grades. I did just that for a very long time. My party girl actions never impacted my school, even to this day. Instead, it affected my family and sense of self. Today I am sober. This is a great accomplishment, but I still feel resistant to the way I was interpellated as an addict before ingesting any mind-altering substance. It is painful to listen to others describe who you are with such certainty when you have no sense that what they are telling you is accurate. The genetic theory of addiction is relatively recent in the scientific literature, but it has pervaded many institutional discourses surrounding addiction treatment and prevention. Because the theory is supported by scientific research, I couldn't assert my disagreement. I was destined and doomed to be an addict because my genes were made that way. I could avoid it, they said, only if I abstained in perpetuity. This rigid categorization based on only speculative and futural events is a system of knowledge-making that betrays all psychoanalytic knowledge. Perhaps this is what lead me to study the psychoanalytic method. This thesis concerns addiction and, in that sense, is as personal as it is academic. I began writing what became Part One of this thesis shortly after I first got sober and started Part Two shortly after I started my psychoanalytic treatment. Each of these parts can stand on its own but are also intertwined.

**

In 1895 Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer published the first acknowledged psychoanalytic text, *Studies on Hysteria*. That same year, Louis and Auguste Lemièrè

held their first film screenings in Paris.¹ One year prior to these events, Freud began his personal and clinical study of cocaine consumption.² He wrote of his patients' cocaine use and his own, but the behavior never acquired the diagnostic status of Freud's neuroses categories (perversion, hysteria, obsession, et al.) Film theorists and psychoanalytic scholars have acknowledged the connection between film and psychoanalysis, but the added synchronicity with the study of drug use has been overlooked. The dreamlike quality of cinema makes it a perfect object for psychoanalytic study. Using Freud's dream analysis method to interpret the unconscious latent in film, psychoanalytic film theory remains a niche but a substantial field in humanities scholarship. The formal similarities between movies and dreams, fantasy and fiction, allow the historical connection between Freud and France's first filmmakers to be but a starting point for more significant affinities.

Addiction's place in this pairing may seem peculiar or arbitrary. However, addiction's place in psychological suffering and its frequent appearance in major motion pictures are just two of the myriad relations tying addiction to psychoanalysis and film study. Freud encountered cocaine for the first time in 1884 and was instantly fascinated with what he perceived to be its therapeutic effects. He used it for ten years, during which he rarely consumed alcohol. Freud was a heavy smoker, but addiction problems that appeared in his clinic only frustrated him. His peculiar relationship to personal consumption might inform the relative absence of the diagnosis in his written work.

¹ "Auguste Lumière & Louis Lumière." *International Photography Hall of Fame*, 16 Aug. 2019, <https://iphf.org/inductees/auguste-louis-lumiere/>.

² Wollheim, Richard. *Sigmund Freud*. Germany, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

This thesis attempts to provide a much-needed psychoanalytic intervention into addiction at the social and cultural levels. Pairing the biopolitical and psychoanalytic frameworks with the analysis of a filmic text allows the addict category to expand beyond its scientific definitions. I propose no curative program or a sociological analysis; I open the space for considerations of what it means to be addicted, which may prove elucidating for scholars of addiction, addicts, and abstainers alike.

Mastering Death, Rejecting the Future: The Peculiar Sovereignty of the Addict

“[O]n a certain level every subject, average as he may be, wants his destruction, *whether he wants it or not.*” Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real*, 100

Where is the addict situated within biopolitical, necropolitical, and sovereign discourses? This particular figure is marked by its precarious relationship to the body, death, and politics. At the level of the body, the addict engages with that which is immediately pleasurable to the point of physical and psychological decay. Sociopolitically, addiction is a stigmatized condition associated with moral degeneration and decadence. In contrast, popular representations of the addict in artistic mediums can be romantic and glamorous, focusing on the addict as bohemian outlaw. At the level of the Law, narcotic addiction implicates the addict as figure of criminality. It is this multiplicitious, multivalent positionality that this paper uses as a point of departure.

The question of the addict within biopolitical discourses is a capacious one. In an attempt to open up a discussion about this figure and its significance for discourses of the body, this paper studies the addict as ambivalent figure of temporal resistance, sovereignty, and master of death. Drawing upon Agamben's *homo sacer* and notion of bare life, Foucault's *homo economicus*, Bataille's understandings of sovereignty, and excess, and the anti-social thesis in queer theory, this chapter seeks to uncover the addict's relationship to life, death, consumption, and temporality. Following a biopolitical analysis, I investigate the potential anxieties that surround addiction, anxieties which provide biopolitical formations the fodder to deploy particular biopolitical/necropolitical framings onto the addicted subject. Invoking affect theory, I

understand anxiety as the “tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event,” vague insofar as anxiety has no specific, identifiable object (Rachman, 1998 quoted in Ahmed, 124).³ What does addiction’s ontology threaten?

I argue for the necessity of Lacanian psychoanalytic intervention into discourses of addiction to reveal just *what it is about addiction* and the addicted subject that fuels and bolsters particular biopolitical theories and cultural rhetorics of addiction. I contend that latent anxieties regarding the addict’s attempts at mastering death by closely encountering it explain (at least partially) specific biopolitical modalities of addiction rhetoric and policy. By exposing the similarities between the addict and the *homo economicus* of contemporary wellness culture, I argue that the addict’s disruptive social and political impact stems from their refusal to valorize longevity/futurity and self-administration of *jouissance*. While the neoliberal subject of wellness culture attempts to master death in a display of civilian sovereignty, the wellness subject does so through practices of delayed gratification, self-discipline, and futurity. Indeed, the addict’s rejection of the future as eternal sovereign constructs the addict as degenerate, diseased, and generally pathological. However, this general anti-futurity and insistence upon the *jouissance* of the present makes the addict a figure of oppositional temporality that crumbles hegemonic sovereignty as such.

Diseased Bodies

Let us first briefly consider the medicalized discourses of addiction as disease.

³ Ahmed, Sara. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117–139.

According to the Center on Addiction, addiction is a “complex” disease that “disrupts regions of the brain that are responsible for reward, motivation, learning, judgment, and memory.” Addiction is embodied at the level of the neuron, a corporeal origin that elides the extent to which social/environmental factors contribute to addictive behavior and attempts to explain away agency on behalf of the compulsive user. Indeed, on the same page on the Center for Addiction’s website, it asserts, “people do not choose how their brain and body respond to drugs and alcohol.”⁴ This epistemological retreat to the level of the body simultaneously seeks to recast the addict as a victim while also painting the addict as beyond normal, healthy embodiment.

More recent literature furthers this line by explaining the causes of addiction with genetic models. Children of addicts are eight times more likely to develop addiction than those without addicted parents (Melemis). As a result of this theoretical lineage and the presence of addiction in my immediate family, I was interpellated as an addict years before my first encounter with intoxicants. The notion of personal autonomy was largely dismissed in favor of a predetermined telos that could be circumvented through my complete abstinence from drugs and alcohol. Though such medicalized epistemologies may be “more humane” than historical understandings of addicts as moral degenerates, if we have learned anything from Foucault’s analysis of the mad we know that such humanitarian “progress” is not innocent. As with the madman in Foucault, the addict, “a human being originally endowed with reason,” is “no longer guilty” of making the *incorrect choice* of moral degeneracy (Madness and

⁴ “Addiction as a Disease.” *The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse*, 14 Apr. 2017

Civilization, 345). Instead, addicts are victims of their biology and even their neurological destiny. Rewriting the addict's ontology from the previous narrative of personal choice to the corporeal and biological epistemology of science strips agency from the addicted subject while enforcing biopolitical technologies of knowledge production. Moreover, the biological codification of addiction introduces concrete, scientific, biopolitical modes of control into the realm of corporeality.

Excluded Inclusion

Agamben's reinterpretation of the Greek figure *homo sacer*, the subject whose murder is condoned yet whose body cannot serve as the object of sacrifice, offers a particular biopolitical framing through which we may understand the figure of the addict in contemporary social relations. *Homo sacer*, for Agamben, is the subject excluded both from *zoē*, the biological life of the human and of all living beings, and from *bios*, the particular mode of the good life specific to the human as political subject (13). These two modes of life are thoroughly imbricated, though, according to Agamben, *zoē's* importance usurps that of *bios* due to *zoē's* foundational necessity for the existence of the political. Though perhaps intended to protect the biological life of the polis, this prioritization has grave political ramifications. As a consequence of this unequal valuation, political formations "detach the body from the properties of a person," formulating naked or "bare life" (Snoek, 130). This barren, stripped version of life, constituted only by *being* and removed from the possibility for *well-being*, allows governing forces of sovereignty to dispose and disregard.

For Agamben, the consequences of bare life are embodied in concentration camps and other forms of inhuman political imprisonment. He found that the camp's status as a "state of exception" was only possible through its status as excluded inclusion, extra-political, yet fully implicated within the space of political sovereign power. The relegation of certain subjects to these physical spaces of exception is only possible by stripping their political *bios* (228). By virtue of bare life's violent separation from the good or political life of humanity, the subject of bare life "no longer looks human" and is therefore disposable (Snoek, 130). The transformation of the biological into "the supreme political principle" allows naked life's double valence as that which is both overvalued and disregarded (Agamben, 10).

It is easy to uncover how *homo sacer* and bare or naked life apply to the addict's unique positionality. As explained above, the addict is a figure of biological significance. Addiction's extreme consumption corrodes the body of the drug user and, in popular medical discourse, is a physical and psychological disease with roots in the genetic or neurological structures of the brain. Additionally, addiction is politicized, rendering the addict extra-political, beyond the public sphere, and unwelcome in the private. Combining these two enactments of sovereign control makes the addict a target of biopolitical sovereignty. Though the physical and legal structure of the prison encampment is absent from the discourses and material realities of substance abusers, other equally violent modes of biopolitical and necropolitical sovereignty enact Agamben's theoretical framework.

Perhaps the most literal example of the addict as *homo sacer* exists in the Philippine government's legal sanctioning of the murder of drug addicts and dealers who ostensibly facilitate drug addiction. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte initiated a national War on Drugs in 2016, which primarily uses police force and condones vigilante violence at the expense of the lives of 12,000 drug users and suppliers (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Such violence is unconcealed; Manila's police chief admits, "[t]here are thousands of people who are being killed, yes, but there are millions who live, see?" (Reuters, 2017). In fact, at the inception of this drug war, President Duterte said to a crowd of about 500 civilians in Manila, "If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself as getting their parents to do it would be too painful" (Guardian, 2016).

This state-sanctioned murder is not rendered criminal and is done with impunity even when conducted extrajudicially. Indeed, in a comment on the presiding drug war, The Philippine Commission on Human Right's chairman, Chito Gascon, has said, "[in this country the basic problem is impunity, no one is ever held to account for the worst violations. Ever." (Reuter, 2017). Moreover, President Duterte has reportedly "vowed to pardon" police officers convicted of committing murder (Reuters, 2017).

The parallels between the drug addict under the Philippine drug war and the status of *homo sacer* brought to our attention by Agamben are apparent. President Duterte's policy renders the addict as an embodiment of bare life insofar as the addict is no longer within the register of the human; the addict's death is beyond the realm of criminal punishment and is encouraged as a part of a political program to purify or

improve the nation. The addict is included in juridical discourses by virtue of its exclusion, and its status as condemned to death.

Though the case of the Philippines is extreme, it does provide an opening for discussion of the addict as a clear threat to juridical sovereignty. It may appear that addicts are vilified merely because of the illegality of their actions. It may also be tempting to attribute this punitive response to the addict's inability or refusal to participate in the social as a "good citizen" who is employed, pays taxes, and so on. These explanations most certainly have validity and should be explored in depth. Still, these explanations lack the affective, arguably unconscious motives for disregarding or enacting violence on addicted subjects. The following gives a psychoanalytic account of addiction and a comparison of the addict to the *homo economicus* of neoliberal wellness culture. This discursive bringing-together highlights these subjects' unexpected mechanistic and qualitative congruencies and, therefore, the necessity for psychoanalytic explanations regarding the addict's unique relationship to sovereignty that induces anxiety in the cultural sphere.

Beyond Pleasure

Addiction is a unique case for psychoanalysis because of its intimate relationship to the pleasures of the body and their permutations within the psyche and the unconscious. In technical terms, addiction in the psychoanalytic discourse is called toxicomania, a term that underscores addiction's relationship to toxicity and, therefore, death. More than other psychic pathologies, toxicomania "seems to centre precisely upon the complex entanglement of life, death and *jouissance*" (Loose, 138).

Jouissance, translated directly as enjoyment, refers more explicitly to enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle,⁵ which cannot be signified. For Freud, this going beyond the pleasure principle is a delving into the realm of the death-drive, a psychoanalytic drive that, if fulfilled, would, of course, lead to annihilation. *Jouissance* is an impossibility around which our psychic drives circle, causing and prolonging our ability to live and proceed as subjects.

In short, the toxicomaniac repeatedly attempts to gain access to *jouissance* through the self-administration of the narcotic that brings brief but condensed pleasure that separates the subject from the world of signifiers and consciousness. This embodied pleasure is “mainlined” into the psyche in an abrupt manner that effectively cheats the normative pathways to satisfaction and enjoyment. The well-known toxic effects of this mainlining bring the user closer to death, while the effects of the high are a psychic death- a radical detachment from the self and the world. Rik Loose describes this relationship between enjoyment and death as a “timeless interzone” in which the toxicomaniac “is disinherited from a history, and curiously enough, also from a future” (145).

Loose continues by associating this synchronic temporal orientation with an illusory access to the choice between life and death. This choice allows the addict to psychically avoid, and hence master, death itself (145). At the social and symbolic

⁵The pleasure principle is a Freudian psychoanalytic concept that describes the economic dynamic at work in the subject’s relationship to tension and relaxation. This dynamic aims at equilibrium and, “originates in an unpleasant state of tension and thereupon determines for itself such a path that its ultimate issue coincides with a relaxation of this tension, i.e. with avoidance of ‘pain’ or with production of pleasure” (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1).

level, it is not as if the addict is unaware of the impossibility of immortality. It is also not accurate to say that in the addict's dance with the deadly, there is a conscious concession to death's inevitability. Rather, the proximity to death is an attempt to defy it, to come up against it so closely so as to denigrate its status as absolute sovereign. This defiance is an endeavor to address the Other, an essential quality to many pathological symptoms (147). However, what is unique to toxicomania is that this Other here is death, and the mode of address is an aggressive disregard that demotes the supreme and constant presence death has over all conscious subjects. Furthermore, the addict's independent administration of *jouissance* through the drug rejects the Other's recurrent role as administrator. The addict is in control of their access to *jouissance* while pursuing mastery of "the ultimate master," death (162).

To further bolster this claim, let us turn to Bataille's understanding of sovereignty as explained in *Homo Sacer* and Achille Mbembe's seminal work, "Necropolitics." Both Agamben and Mbembe turn to Bataille's unique conception of sovereignty because of this conception's relationship to legislating death rather than to merely fostering life.⁶ Bataille's sovereign is not solely the figure of immanent political authority; it is also the figure who embodies the "instantaneous transgression of the

⁶ Georges Bataille discusses the sovereign in *The Accursed Share Vol. III* where he defines sovereignty as the total surrender to useless enjoyment, a suspended state of non-knowledge and total being. His definition directly opposes the traditional political use of the term which concerns power and political authority. On page 199 he writes, "*What is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but this present time.*"

See: Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Volumes II & III: An Essay on General Economy*. Zone, 1991.

prohibition on killing,” consumed in totality with “the forms in which man gives himself to himself:…laughter, eroticism, struggle, luxury” (Agamben, 93, 156-157). In Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, the specific iteration of sovereign power that decides on what subjects must die also invokes Bataille’s understanding of the domain of the sovereign as “life beyond death” (Mbembe, 15). Mbembe refers to Bataille’s sovereign as the subject with no regard for the limits of death, who does not fear death’s ultimate power. The sovereign disregards these limits and transgresses them (Mbembe, 16). Here, there is a mechanistic overlap between the psychoanalytic definition of the addict as subject of attempted mastery of death and the Bataillean notion of the sovereign as transgressor of limits.

Given the previously explicated psychoanalytic explanation and the above paragraph’s investigation of Bataille, it may be the case that the addict’s formulation as *homo sacer* is explained by anxieties surrounding attempts to master death. This kind of mastery is not appropriate for the civilian subject; it is reserved for the sovereign who, alone, decides who must live and who must die. Despite the addict’s compulsion, their pursuit of enjoyment in the face of mortal risk exemplifies a prohibitive sovereign mastery that destabilizes the social order and thus, engenders anxiety in the nonsovereign subject. Anxieties of this nature can be seen more obviously in the juridical prohibition against suicide generally and specifically in the peculiar prohibition of suicide for subjects on death row (Lifton and Mitchell, 82). When the choice between life and death is in tandem with a compulsive relationship with *jouissance*, as with the addict, the subject becomes a figure of impossibility that can

only be understood and managed through extensive medicalizing rhetoric with which to tame the addict or with juridical measures to extinguish the addict as subject. The consequence of this medicalizing rhetoric is the effective stripping of the addict's *bios*, reducing the addict to the level of a pure biological subject whose status as a rational political actor diminishes, making the addict *homo sacer*.

Addicted to What?

Today we see another figure that attempts to master death (and thus attempt sovereignty) through opposing means. This figure is the *homo economicus* of contemporary wellness culture. Ostensibly in absolute opposition to the addict, *homo economicus*' mechanisms and relationship to life and death reveal that this opposition is only aesthetic. Tracing the synchronous structures of the addict and *homo economicus* will excavate the particularities of the addict's relationship to time, pleasure, and mortality that threaten normative modes of sovereignty. The absence of these particularities allows the *homo economicus* to flourish while their presence condemns the addict to the realm of the *homo sacer*.

Foucault's conception of *homo economicus* describes the subject of neoliberal governmentality, who is no longer defined simply by exchange, but by the entrepreneurship of and investment in the self. *Homo economicus* is the subject of human capital, whose very being is economically defined and is always already situated within the market (Foucault, 219). This economic character situates *homo economicus* directly within the structure of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism deems competition natural, emphasizes individual and market freedom, and transfers market ideology onto

all realms of life and subjectivity. A significant difference between traditional liberal political policy and neoliberal political policy is the neoliberal de-emphasis on state programs to solve social issues, like the population's health. In place of rigorous, socialized health care or resource distribution, for example, solutions that would each address health in more structural, permanent ways, neoliberalism has relegated health insurance to the market and commodity production.

Homo economicus invests in their health, a fundamentally personal issue, by purchasing the correct foods, detox juices, gym memberships and even fitness attire. This phenomenon describes the pursuit of wellness, a name with origins in the late 1950s describing “a condition of change in which the individual moves forward, climbing toward a higher potential of functioning” (Blei). In this quotation, we can identify several components of wellness culture that represent a commitment to health as the temporal orientation towards the future, the neoliberal space of sovereignty. The word “potential” implicitly situates the ideal mode of functioning as not yet arrived, as located in times and behaviors to come. Of course, the forward movement and climbing metaphor exemplify this teleological orientation. The invocation of “higher potential of functioning” both denotes the neoliberal understanding of the body as investment and the more subtle commitment to prolonging life and mastering (hence, delaying) the aging process. Health allows one to continue producing, consuming, and reifying social relations. Each choice *homo economicus* makes is an investment in *homo economicus*' future. Each wellness product purchased and each yoga class taken is read as a choice for health and contra death. *Homo economicus*' injunction to act in accordance with

what is healthy, and sustaining opposes them to the addict's Bataillean sovereignty. Consuming that which *prolongs* life, delays death, and respects futurity reflects a commitment to neoliberal, biopolitical considerations of the body and desire. The addict's behavior, however, reflects the opposite commitments, and it is this inversion of value that determines the addict's exclusion.

In a brilliant piece of cultural analysis, Jason Trebbe describes wellness culture's ideological structure as a "Victorian morality" that champions nineteenth-century virtues under the guise of health. Different in appearance, these new upper-class wellness advocates employ and advertise versions of morality congruous with their Victorian-era counterparts. Among those moral values are self-denial, self-discipline, and a commitment to self-improvement, values displayed in the nineteenth century and the present. Today these values manifest in wellness culture's dedication to physical fitness and clean eating, admittedly a dedication absent from the Victorian era, but a dedication whose central tenets derive from Victorian sensibility. While the Victorians castigated the lower classes for their out-of-control sexualities and hygiene, the contemporary advocates of wellness culture engage in castigation at the level of cultural dominance and subliminal hegemony. It is inappropriate for today's liberal elites to shame the working poor's eating habits; however, identical shaming occurs implicitly through the widespread devaluation of unhealthy behaviors under the guise of objective scientific research. Though some activities and habits prolong life and others hasten death, internalizing this knowledge to condemn and discipline those who do not behave with wellness in mind is as insidious a practice as the Victorian upper-

class'. Trebbe writes,

“Being fit now indexes class, saturating both fitness and food culture. As calories have become cheaper, obesity has changed from being a sign of wealth to a sign of moral failure. Today, being unhealthy functions as a hallmark of the poor’s cupidity the same way working-class sexual mores were viewed in the nineteenth century.”

This attitude to unhealthy food consumption is evident in other contexts, namely drug and alcohol consumption. Indeed, the addict embodies a complete lack of self-restraint and discipline associated with the nineteenth-century Victorian and the *homo economicus*. Behind this Victorian morality that upholds the pursuit of longevity, self-control, and wellness as pathways to moral superiority is a fear of the drug addict approaching the *jouissance* approximate to death and the threatening sovereignty it signifies. The critical distinction between the consumption of unhealthy foods and the lack of fitness practices and drug and alcohol intake is that the addict makes a priority out of the forbidden and uniquely immediate pleasure of narcotic and alcohol self-administration. The addict is not just undisciplined, unproductive, and unhealthy; the addict engages in a life intimately mixed up with death, playing with the choice between death and life constantly.

Keeping in mind the addict’s relationship to mastery of death through its “imaginary relationship between death and choice,” the overlaps between the addict and *homo economicus* are clear (Loose, 142). Both engage in forms of consumption, one form that enables longevity and one that enables toxic pleasure. *Homo economicus* attempts to master death by delaying its inevitability, while the addict taunts death’s sovereignty by approaching it closer and closer and denying its absolute authority by

surviving. If the addict is a manifestation of Bataille's sovereign, and *homo economicus*, too, manifests these sovereign logics related to mastery over death, then what allows the civil society to demonize addiction and valorize the subject of wellness? This difference in political interpellation calls into question each figure's relationship to futurity, *jouissance*, and discipline. Indeed, it is not addiction as such that is the problem. After all, it is not uncommon to treat addiction with another addiction to activities or foods that enforce health, productivity, and wellness rather than decay, pleasure, and death. The actual cause of anxiety that produces the addict as a subject of biopolitical subjection is their embodiment of the *jouissance* of the present. This embodiment fundamentally dislocates normative valorization of the future. The addict's temporality directly opposes the *homo economicus*, who is valued for their denial of *jouissance* and valuation of the future as ultimate sovereign.

Lord/Bondsman, Addict/*homo economicus*

It would be irresponsible to elide Hegel's foundational account of sovereignty in discussing death's relationship to the sovereign master. As the addict legislates their own access to *jouissance*, Hegel's lord (sovereign) enacts a mastery associated with pure consumption and pleasure that implicitly masters the bondsman, a battle with whom situates the lord in his sovereign position. The following compares the addict's socially "problematic" attempt at mastering death with the lord's sovereignty and the *homo economicus*' accepted attempt with the servile bondsman. By analyzing Hegel's foundational contribution to discourses of sovereignty, we may locate the origins of the contemporary valorization of futurity and delayed access to *jouissance* seen in

neoliberal wellness culture. That Hegel associates the mindless consumption and leisure of the lord with a stunted or underdeveloped self-consciousness insinuates a moral stunted-ness on the lord's part. The implications of identifying with or mirroring the actions of Hegel's lord undoubtedly incite revulsion, particularly when Hegel himself implies the ethical superiority of the bondsman's path to self-consciousness. Framing the lord and the bondsman's relationship to labor and mature psychic potential as Hegel does, plants the seeds in philosophical discourse that have grown into the contemporary lionization and manifestation of *homo economicus*.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit's* lord and bondsman chapter, Hegel makes explicit the connection between the bondsman's encounter with and fear of death and the formulation or realization of self-consciousness, a state I'd argue is homologous to the *homo economicus'* future-oriented sovereignty. Hegel also reveals the lord's relationship to consumption and leisure, which prohibits the lord from attaining the self-consciousness the bondsman eventually attains. By reading the dialectic's implicit valorization of the bondsman's self-consciousness and the implicit moral castigation of the lord's "for-itself" consciousness, we can see the origins of the contemporary rejection of the addicted *jouissance* laden, anti-futurist path to mastery. Furthermore, by tracing the affinities between the bondsman's path to self-consciousness with the *homo economicus'* socially lauded route to mastery, we may understand the neoliberal encouragement of such renunciatory and future-oriented subjectivity.

Through an encounter with the terror of death's inevitability, Hegel's bondsman develops a self-reflexive consciousness that propels the bondsman to self-mastery,

emphasizing the importance of distancing oneself from death for phenomenological sovereignty- sovereignty sought after by subjects of wellness. The lord, in contrast, through pure consumption and the absence of the anxiety over mortality, resembles the addict's anti-futurist sovereignty.

Hegel posits a scenario in which two beings, or consciousnesses, not yet fully "self-conscious" and lacking in the ability for reflexive subjective recognition, encounter one another. In such an encounter, "each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other" (Hegel, 113). Each regards the other not as a proper subject but as "a mere thing" (Honenberger, 154). Hegel characterizes this encounter as fundamentally hostile and necessarily leading to a confrontation or "life-and-death struggle," out of which the capacity for mutual recognition of independent subjectivity is attained (114). Therein, one subject or consciousness submits to the other. The encounter with death is essential for Hegel; through fear of death, the subject in submission realizes its relationship to life itself and can orient itself relationally in the world. Rather than living an experience that is purely "for-itself" and of consumptive, immediate nature, the subject occupies a consciousness that exists for the other. The subject of consciousness in power "is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself" while "the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another." As Hegel succinctly concludes, "[t]he former is the lord, the other is bondsman" (115). Though both the addict and the subject of wellness engage in consumption for narcissistic purposes, the *homo economicus* is dependent on their investment in futurity, to which they are enslaved. Invested in the self-cultivation and

labor that may bring sovereignty or mastery in the future, the *homo economicus*' ideological positioning mirrors that of the bondsman. While the bondsman's essential nature is "to live or to be for another," the *homo economicus*' respective other is the sovereignty of the future.

Interestingly, for Hegel, the bondsman's encounter with death allows them to attain a proper form of self-consciousness unattainable to the lord. The lord exists "only for himself," living off the labor of the bondsman, who performs tasks that are essentially those of the lord. As such, both subjects occupy their named roles while simultaneously acting as their role's opposite; "lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is" (117). This reciprocity and symbiosis are mirrored today in the way wellness culture and the *homo economicus* subject exist in reactive opposition to the lifestyles of immediate *jouissance* and consumption, the lifestyles of both drug addiction and more general un-wellness. Moreover, for Hegel, the bondsman's labor, suffering, and fear of death allow them to attain self-consciousness that may eventually lead to absolute and sustainable sovereignty. Here, I liken self-consciousness to the state of future-oriented potential sought after by subjects of wellness culture—the *homo economicus* labors on itself in the way the bondsman labors for the lord. The fundamental similarity is a kind of renunciation and displacement of pleasure onto another entity, whether that entity is the future or the figure of the lord. Byung-Chul Han continues this line of thought in *Psycho-politics* where he writes,

Today's neoliberal slave lacks the sovereignty—indeed, the freedom—of the master who, according to Hegel's dialectic, performs no labour at all and only enjoys. For Hegel, the sovereignty of the master derives from his rising above bare life and risking death itself in the process. Such excess—living and enjoying beyond measure—is alien to the slave (2).

The addict's relationship to *jouissance* is homologous to this characterization of the master as one who masters death yet lives in the pursuit of excessive enjoyment. Alien to the slave or bondsman and the neoliberal *homo economicus*, the master and the addict live only for pleasure, a modality so appealing yet so threatening to social stability that it must function as and occupy the space of moral degeneracy.

The Addict and Queer Anti-Futurity

Though not explicitly about the *homo economicus*, Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* explains the homonormative subject entranced, like the *homo economicus*, by the promise of the future. Initiating what is now called the anti-social thesis in queer theory, Edelman offers a uniquely oppositional queer ethics that renounces the future as ultimate sovereign in whose name normative political projects, queer and otherwise, invest and defend. The oppositional framework offered in Edelman's polemic allows us to understand the addict's unique relation to the *jouissance* of the present more fully, a relation that defines an oppositional sovereignty threatening the dominant biopolitical governmentality which seeks to prolong the futures of its subjects.

As iterated, Edelman's discourse does not temporally orient itself towards the future, a temporal space he argues is dominated by heterosexual social values and limits. Edelman locates the political orientation towards the future within the symbolic

figure of The Child, a figure universally protected and defended, one whose celebration is considered nonpartisan and apolitical. Edelman cites the use of The Child within both conservative and liberal political campaigns to illustrate its political neutrality, its unquestionable value insofar as The Child is read as innocent and is ideologically representative of the future and the social order's reproduction and affirmation. This is evident, as Edelman points out, in political campaigns and the bipartisan emphasis on the future of the nation's children and the irrevocable valorization of the lives of children in general (15).

Edelman names this unquestionable political valorization reproductive futurism, the term upon which much of his criticism is based. Reproductive futurism is, as Edelman describes, the heterosexual logic of reproducing the social order in the future through the promotion of The Child and the "privileging of heteronormativity," so much so that this ideology makes "unthinkable" the possibility of any resistance or opposition to its dogmatic and straight universality (2). Edelman wonders what resistance to reproductive futurism and its unrelenting ideological and political commitment to the social order would look like and posits that this resistance would, indeed, be the most radical and queer position to occupy. He asserts that "however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order" (2). Removing The Child and what political orientations come with it removes structural affirmation and characterizes the "social order's death drive" (3). Edelman desires a queerness that embraces the stigma and negativity

surrounding queerness and rejects the liberal assimilation into the social order and the future it dearly loves. For Edelman, *No Future* urges the queerest position, one which resists “every social structure or form,” and which opposes the “structural determinants of politics as such” (3, 4).

Using Lacan to structure his argument, Edelman calls for the queer embodiment of *jouissance*, the psychoanalytic concept with which the addicted subject is immersed. Edelman writes, “[q]ueerness, therefore, is never a matter of becoming, but rather, of embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order. One name for this unnameable remainder, as Lacan describes it, is *jouissance*..” (25). Because *jouissance* is beyond signification and is referred to by Edelman as what is “unnameable,” a queer political embodiment of *jouissance* is necessarily disruptive, perhaps destructive of politics and the Symbolic itself.

Like the addict, Edelman’s anti-reproductive futurist queer denies the valorization of the future, understanding the future’s power to straighten subjects of the present. Edelman’s provocation asserts that the embodiment of *jouissance* necessarily refuses the sovereignty of the future insofar as *jouissance* breaks with a teleological, diachronic temporality. The addict, like the anti-reproductive futurist queer subject of Edelman’s text, chooses the *jouissance* of the now over the delayed and reproductive futurist sovereignty of what has yet to come. By embodying the logics of shattering, disruptive pleasure, the addict and Edelman’s queer subject enact an oppositional sovereignty that self-administers *jouissance*, thereby disrupting normative relationships to time, the body, and subjection as such. The addict’s close encounter

with death disinherits the addict from their future, locating them in a “timeless interzone” which mirrors an embodiment of *jouissance*. (Loose, 145). As Edelman diagnoses queer disinvestment in futurity as disinvestment in projects of homonormativity, I diagnose the addict as equally disinvested in such projects. Indeed, the addict engages in transgressive nowness that is ultimately sovereign insofar as it ruptures the social as always indebted to the future. Like Hegel’s master, the queer anti-futurist, and its manifestation in the temporal logics of the addict poses a threat to the social order insofar as it operates only for the sovereignty of the present, the now.

After tracing cultural epistemologies of addiction, both from the biopolitical and psychoanalytic perspectives, I close this paper with an opening into the implications of engaging in a life preoccupied with that which is impossible, namely, the continuation of *jouissance*. If, as evidenced, a kind of mastery over death, and hence, a civilian practice of sovereignty, is acceptable if done through self-disciplinary, restrictive means, why must we figure the addict a victim of biological pathology? Can we situate modes of cultural disruption and psychological perversion as passive transgressions, despite their social interpellation as mere degenerates? Moreover, if the prolonging of the health of the body through displaced and appropriate pleasures is currently of utmost importance, is it possible to perceive those who do not ascribe to such values as engaged in resistance? After reading the addict as a potential figure of Lee Edelman’s anti-reproductive futurist queerness, I suggest that the addictive preoccupation with *jouissance* destabilizes the temporality of sovereignty, allowing us to consider those outside the bounds of teleological or diachronic temporality as

transgressors of biopolitical governmentality and sovereignty.

Leaving Las Vegas and the Ethics of Addiction

“Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”

“*Jouissance* implies precisely the acceptance of death.”⁷

Mike Figgis’s 1995 addiction film, *Leaving Las Vegas*, is unique because its main character, alcoholic Hollywood script agent Ben Sanderson, (played by the inimitable Nicholas Cage) does not (and will not) articulate a desire for sobriety. The film’s narrative trajectory is uncommon for addiction cinema because the main character’s addiction persists from the first scene to the closing credits. While many popular addiction films like *Beautiful Boy*, *Less Than Zero*, and *Requiem for a Dream* tell addiction stories that either end in sobriety or tragedy, *Leaving Las Vegas*’s narrative does not use addiction as a formal obstacle or tragic conclusion. Ben’s addiction is an integral narrative feature and his most prominent quality; without it, the film would tell only a romantic story. Addiction is the central theme of the film, yet its depiction circumvents what is exceedingly common in contemporary substance abuse cinema: the social and/or psychological moralization of the addict figure. The film depicts the painful realities that addiction can foster for both the addict and their loved ones, but refrains from moralizing the addict in the way films like *Requiem for a Dream* etc. do. Instead, *Leaving Las Vegas* tends to the depiction the addict on the addict’s terms.

⁷ Lacan, Jacques, and Jacques-Alain Miller. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1992. Page 189.

In sync with Las Vegas's rhythmic hedonism and the Real of his deepest wish, Ben Sanderson manages to act without the promise of future happiness and commits to the drive. The Real of Ben Sanderson's desire is to drink—even if the cost of doing so is his demise. The film's depiction of addicted enjoyment as beyond both fantasy and the desire for recognition is critical for revising the way we understand addiction and desire as such. By illustrating the ethical potential in apparently “tragic,” “hopeless,” relations and elucidating the futility of fantasmic enjoyment, *Leaving Las Vegas* challenges the status of addiction and disrupts fantasy's pacifying cultural effect. What *Leaving Las Vegas* brings to the cinema of addiction is an uncomfortable vision of the addict subsumed within and in service to his *own* wish--a phenomenon that is, perhaps, uncomfortable to witness in cinema and our own lived experiences of desire.

Rather than explain the cause for or solution to Ben's drinking, the film illustrates only its enduring persistence and presents it as a part of his character. Though his social status, health, and marriage all rupture in the wake of his liquor-laden transgressions, and despite the weight of unemployment, shame, and worsening physical dependency, Ben is not motivated to do what other addicted characters have: get sober. Ben's love interest, a Las Vegas sex worker named Sera (played by Elizabeth Shue,) gives up on her wish for his sobriety and accepts (verbally and in her actions) his alcoholism at his request. He demands that she never ask him to stop drinking, and she agrees so long as Ben never criticizes her line of work. Their agreement to condone each other's apparent self-destruction is hardly typical. Its ethical value, however, does not reside in its unexpectedness. Ben and Sera's unorthodox agreement is one moment

of many throughout the film where enjoyment is untethered to the Other's fantasy and desire. Ben's vehement refusal to abstain is his refusal to conform to the Other's fantasy of his sobriety. The "Other" in question describes his peers, familial and workplace relationships, as well as the authority of medical advice. Ben holds onto his debauched desire rather than assume the Other's fantasy; instead, he engages with Sera, the only character who does not try to persuade him to adopt a sober fantasy.

With psychoanalytic hermeneutics, we can interpret Ben's auto-annihilation at the level of the film's unconscious rather than at the level of its Symbolic dimension exclusively. This hermeneutic makes legible in *LLV*⁸ what would otherwise elude interpretation. Rather than exclusively read the fantasmic and literal components of the film, I interpret what the film lacks and what keeps the spectator watching. The following details this hermeneutical process and interprets Ben Sanderson as a character whose addiction exceeds explanatory diagnoses such as self-destructive proclivity or mental illness. My psychoanalytically indebted contention is that his choices provocatively iterate the Lacanian ethical "act" and thus, disclose the ethical structure constitutive of his desire. Though Ben's character drinks compulsively despite the problems it causes, his addiction is characterized with a complexity that troubles commonly held notions about addiction. While such notions maintain that addiction is primarily a structure of dependence, *Leaving Las Vegas* reveals addiction's structure of desire. Ben wants to drink, and that desire overrides any others. *LLV* takes what is commonly regarded as standard symptom and depicts it as a legitimate, singular

⁸ Hereafter *LLV* is the abbreviation for *Leaving Las Vegas*.

relation to desire instead.

Without sobriety on the horizon, Ben's interests lie in the pleasures of drinking and the satisfaction of wanting more. What initially appears as a pursuit of alcoholic enjoyment and vehement refusal of sobriety's unpleasure shifts with a psychoanalytic consideration of Ben's desire. Ben is not simply engaged in the pleasure principle's dynamic; Ben enjoys the repetitive highs and lows of alcoholism where his desire for alcohol is as significant as his utter drunkenness. For Ben, there is a paradoxical pleasure in *not having* that rivals the pleasure of having *as such*. Ben gives shape to the death drive⁹'s cyclical persistence and its often self-destructive yet enjoyable pulsion. Likely mistaken for possessing an intolerance for banal dissatisfaction Ben's enjoyment derives from the drink's failure to satisfy, a failure that ignites his desire once more. His is the paradoxical, deceptive enjoyment of the death drive. *Leaving Las Vegas* illustrates the death drives' workings in a way that reframes addicted consumption as a profound enjoyment in dissatisfaction, and as a rejection of the imaginary satisfaction that otherwise dominates psychic and cultural belief. Ben seems to experience unexpected feelings after hearing Sera's briefly uttered wishes and in the wake of his termination. In these moments, his expression and affect indicate neither remorse nor sudden shame as one might reasonably anticipate. Instead, he conveys a continued fidelity to drinking and remains impervious to Other's expectations. There is no sadness or remorse in these moments because Ben does not experience Sera's or his boss's disappointment as a loss of his ability to enjoy. His *jouissance* escapes the

⁹ Further elaboration on the death drive continues on page 36.

fantasmic dimension of the Other, where enjoyment most often takes place for the subject. Instead, Ben enjoys at the level of the Real. Todd McGowan's elaboration of Joan Copjec's intervention on this topic helps solidify the relation between enjoyment and the Other,

As Joan Copjec notes, 'Jouissance flourishes only there where it is not validated by the Other.' Enjoyment consumes the subject and directs all of the subject's attention away from the Other's judgement, which is why one cannot perform it and why being a social outcast doesn't bother the enjoying subject. One immerses oneself completely in enjoyment, and the enjoyment suffices for the subject. In contrast, recognition, though it offers its own form of satisfaction, ultimately leaves the subject eager for something else (McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have*, 90).

As a social outcast, cast aside precisely because of his prohibitive, excessive enjoyment, Ben is uninterested in the other's judgment. Recognition is not his goal, and this is hardly troubled once he meets and falls in love with Sera. The pursuit of *jouissance* trumps the social injunction to desire recognition from the other.

Psychoanalytic Film Theory

To fully appreciate the psychical relevance of *Leaving Las Vegas*, it is critical to surmise the function films have for spectators' psyche. It may seem self-evident that films are fictional, visual narratives that give audiences a way to reflect on their personal lives and social worlds. They inform the content of our intimate and personal desires, thus, changing the nature of our identities. The political, psychical impact that films have, however, is not the reason they entertain. By providing a space where the spectator can forget their day-to-day dissatisfactions and pretend to inhabit the on-screen world, films give pleasure and escape to those who watch. Exiting the theater,

the spectator's disappointments and pessimistic attitudes fade to reveal newfound wishes for happiness. This capacity is the essential utility of all fantasmatic forms. What is missing from this understanding of fantasy is its role in creating the desiring subject. Without fantasy, whether filmic or in dreams, desire itself would not persist. Films give birth to new cultural desires and simultaneously reinscribe the false idea that fantasies lead us to absolute satisfaction.

Films transport private fantasies into the public realm. By projecting private wishes on a public screen in narrative form, filmic content can influence and inform the desires of each spectator. By providing temporary, imagined access to otherwise inaccessible conditions, filmic fantasies incite fascination and enjoyment. The cultural ubiquity and accessibility of filmic narratives make them significant for the public as desiring material. What the film presents to its audience appears attainable not only for its characters but also for the people seated in the theater. Even in films whose genres do not lend themselves to obvious relatability (fantasy, science fiction, or horror films), we watch them for relatable emotional or moral content.

Public familiarity with cinematic fantasy is the ideological support necessary for legitimizing desires for the narrative material. As soon as a subject believes they can *really* have what a film presents, the film's imaginary dimension recedes. On a mass scale, this sort of belief in and wish for what the filmic world has, evolves into a near-ubiquitous ideological fantasy.

Even tragic films offer spectators visions of resolution precisely because *all films end*. Endings are taken for granted as functional components of any narrative

form because they are rarely absent in stories and films. Even narratives that appear to subvert what we expect from a proper ending inevitably end once the book closes and the credits roll. The often-overlooked ending allows the audience to imagine that their troubles might *end* and that final resolutions exist for their climactic obstacles. Without a proper conflict, films would not hold any spectator's interest. Films must depict conflict(s) and path(s) towards their resolution to ensure a captivated audience. Films entertain precisely because they give their audiences reasons for the central conflict and allow us to see it resolve. They sustain the spectator's desire by selectively delaying the protagonist's satisfaction. As Lacan teaches about the continuous renewal and failure of desire, the protagonist's satisfaction at the film's resolution is temporary. The protagonist may win the girl or achieve sobriety, but their sense of fulfillment from such achievements does not last. Todd McGowan writes;

Fantasy is able to provide the subject a relation to the impossible object because of the form that fantasy takes, a form that makes it especially amenable to the cinema. Fantasy does not give the subject the object of desire. Instead, it furnishes a scene in which the subject can take up a relation to its impossible object. The fantasmatic scenario provides a setting in which desire can locate itself, thereby alleviating the constitutive indeterminateness of desire. Fantasy transforms the dissatisfied subject of desire into a subject satisfied with an imaginary enjoyment. (McGowan, 37)

The cinematic form cannot avoid its fantasmic function. This functional commonality between films across genres does not neutralize the political, ethical stakes of cinema's fantasmic dimension. Within addiction cinema, the common staging of decline/recovery fantasies obscures the indeterminacy of satisfaction and reifies belief in enduring happiness. Even more specifically, the dualist depictions of addiction

and sobriety often reinscribe simplistic, moralistic understandings that make addicted desire appear irrational. Films like *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *The Basketball Diaries* (1995), and *Candy* (2006) neatly exhibit this tendency. Each film includes a scene where a character commits a fateful behavior or act that singularly leads to addiction and decline. Scenes like these give viewers authoritative omniscience from which they can make informed judgements about the addicted characters' lack of informed judgement. Audience exclamations like, "if only you hadn't done X! how could you have made such an obvious mistake!" are iterations of this voyeuristic omniscience. If carried over into every-day life, this unsympathetic perspective on addiction would do addicted people great harm. These narratives bolster prevailing beliefs that render the addict as degenerate and pathologized Other.

These films communicate the dangerous consequences of pursuing drugs and imply that the addict's failure is in pursuing the drug object. This analysis aligns with a vast network of cultural narratives that instruct the subject to pursue happiness through responsible decision-making and ambition. If the subject's choice of objects along this path is correct, their dissatisfaction will remain behind them. Unspoken beliefs like these indicate a common misunderstanding of desire that evades confrontation with the traumatic real: the object of desire never arrives, and its pursuit will be circuitous. Films that end in exuberant celebration and success, stage fantasies

where the characters finally possess the object a.¹⁰¹¹ The addiction films whose credits roll after celebrating the protagonist's sobriety, position recovery as that object of satisfaction.

Addiction narratives that depict an addict's rise and fall include the addict's desire for self-destruction but designate it as an unfortunate consequence of particular genetic predispositions or of poor upbringing. Both framings function as explanations for the universal tendency for subjects to act against their rational interests, whether they use drugs or not. However, the purpose of this discussion is not to champion the values of what might appear irrational. Instead, I emphasize the ethical value of narratives that stray from the exigencies of cinematic desire. Cinematic fantasies whose formal components diverge from the false promises of fantasy, in general, are those that can provoke an ethical orientation to addiction and desire as such. As an excessive fantasy of destruction that depicts addicted desire as both destructive and relieving, *Leaving Las Vegas* thus, confronts the spectator with ambivalence—an experience that can disrupt personal and cultural understandings of ethical choice. This confrontation does not *instruct* the viewer how to make sense of the film, it *permits* the viewer to create a meaning for themselves. *Leaving Las Vegas* confronts the audience with the excessive satisfaction characteristic of *jouissance*. *LLV* displays the traumatic

¹⁰ See Pg. 216 in *Lacan and Contemporary Film* “Most narratives aim at this secret *jouissance* that lies at the heart of the objet petit a, and the fantasmatic resolution is an attempt to stage a scene in which the subject would be able to access this enjoyment. Thus, the fantasmatic resolution both provides pleasure and allows the subject to believe in the power of desire.”

¹¹ Lacan calls the evanescent object of pursuit the objet a. The search for objet a, the final destination for happiness, is determined to fail for all subjects because the imagined finish line does not exist. Objet a is a fantasmic, imaginary object that structurally sustains our identity and that of our social world.

ambivalence at the heart of addicted desire. The display takes place not only in *LLV*'s narrative content and in Ben's characterization, it also emerges in the film's editing, soundtrack, and in Nicholas Cage's performance.

Initial reviews describe Ben as a suicidal man.¹² This assessment, however, is not based on what Ben says in the script. The reviewers seem to struggle to describe Ben's commitment to drinking as anything other than a "suicidal quest."¹³ Because most popular addiction narratives color their addicted characters with pity and self-hatred, *Leaving Las Vegas*'s relative refusal to do so is a cultural anomaly that problematizes popular cultural fantasies of addiction. The reviews do, however, acknowledge *Leaving Las Vegas*'s nonconformity, as with the following review from *Rolling Stone*:

All signs point to another 12-step cliché-fest complete with agonizing therapy and gut-wrenching rehab before the final fade to redemption...To its everlasting credit, *Leaving Las Vegas* refuses to conform. No back story spells out Sera's career as a call girl. A few hints are dropped about a marriage in Ben's past, though no connection is made between his past and his drinking. Ben and Sera accept each other as is. He swigs; she screws — it's what they do. The occasional bartender or cabbie may express dismay at two attractive young people hurtling toward self-destruction; Ben and Sera do not.¹⁴

This review notices the film's departure from the "cliché-fest" that is addiction cinema and even shares the sentiment I have thus far expressed: drinking and doing sex work

¹² Film Comment, David Thompson, the New York Times, Janet Masline, 2009, Film Quarterly 1996 Albert Johnson

¹³ Film Quarterly, 1996

¹⁴ Travers, Peter. "Leaving Las Vegas." *Rolling Stone*, 27 Oct. 1995, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/leaving-las-vegas-122527/>.

are simply what Ben and Sera do. The typical review, on the other hand, credits the film for its originality but engages in ideologically freighted character analysis:

But in a way, she is more of a mess because she has worked out a way in which she reckons she is still in control, even that it is possible to be very good at her job and having a fine time. Ben at least knows that he is a farce and a wreck (*Film Comment* 1995)

His goal is to kill himself by consuming inordinate amounts of alcohol, and to submit to whatever fleshly blandishments come his way. (*Film Quarterly* 1995)

These suicidal diagnoses and vehement lifestyle assessments are stubborn symptoms of unconscious ideological commitments. The claim that Sera fools herself into contentment in sex work is as manipulative as the assertion that Ben wants to end his life. Both readings try to make sense of *Leaving Las Vegas*'s non-traditional figuration of addicted desire within normative and accepted addiction narratives. Insisting that Ben wants to die situates his desire into an already existing ideological fantasy of the addict, where addiction drives its "victims" into a spiraling cycle of shame and self-hate. Insisting that he loves such a naïve and messy woman as Sera bolsters the claim on Ben's self-hatred and lack of self-respect. What if Ben doesn't hate himself at all and is (like many of us) obsessively committed to doing what he loves? What if Ben's exceptional deviance lies only in the "what" to which he commits? Might it be that Sera is Ben's soul mate given their affinities for abjection? Furthermore, what if Ben is actually *more* ethically committed to his desire than most? What if his ethical commitment is ethical *only* if it produces negative consequences? I suggest that addicted desire is, in fact, an *ethical* desire whose ethical content is often overlooked for the sake of ideological fantasy. Ben refuses to give up on his desire and thus gives

up on everything else, but, as Mari Ruti posits, “to cede on one’s desire, Lacan suggests, is to betray oneself as an ethical creature.”¹⁵

Through Ben’s figuration as an addict, caught between the syncopated rhythms of the death drive and desire, *Leaving Las Vegas* illustrates Lacan’s fundamental psychoanalytic ethic—“The only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one’s desire”(321).¹⁶ By demonstrating the quoted Lacanian dictum, *LLV* escapes the mainstream cinematic tendency to characterize addicts within two distinct tropes: either the addict desires sobriety and is framed as ill and helpless¹⁷ or the addict desires nothing but intoxication and tumbles down-hill into self-destruction¹⁸, often taking a friend or lover along. Excluding these archetypal themes, Mike Figgis produces a film that avoids moralizing the addict and resists functioning only as ideological fantasy. This is a rare feat. The film allows its main character to simultaneously decay and flourish—paradoxically experiencing both processes while severely alcoholic. *Leaving Las Vegas* opposes addiction cinema’s tendency to construct a narrative fantasy for the spectator in which the audience feels pity for the addict on screen, thus fulfilling their desire to save the addict or see them perish. Instead, Ben is figured as beyond redemption and without futural desire. The fantasmatic future and the health required to live long enough to “get” there both function as ideological fantasies promised only to those who, unlike Ben, abstain from self-destruction and accede to the desire of the

¹⁵ Mari Ruti, “From Butlerian Reiteration to Lacanian Defiance” Chapter 2 *The Ethics of Opting Out* (46)

¹⁶ Lacan. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 321.

¹⁷ Films like *The Basketball Diaries*, *Beautiful Boy*

¹⁸ Films like *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Lost Weekend*, *Candy*

social Other. To act with the imagined, future self in mind is to prioritize the then over the present. This sacrificial ethic requires its adherents to make offerings to their future selves. Today's various restrictions and delayed gratifications ensure our vitality and pleasure tomorrow. Subjects who refuse to make sacrifices are pathologized as heretically disinterested in the future's divine authority. The ideological injunction insists that subjects identify with a future ideal and desire objects that guarantee their fantasy. The unrealized consequence of adhering to this injunction is losing the opportunity to interrogate our real desires. For this reason, futurity itself can be read as a pathology, one defined by symptomatic delusions and ignorance of one's desire.¹⁹

The following elaborates on the mechanisms of the pleasure principle and the death drive, between which Ben oscillates, as well as the context for the ethic of psychoanalysis mentioned above. Adding to the discussion of addiction within psychoanalytic discourse, I argue for a reconsideration of the addict as an ethical subject, fidelitous to their desire.

From Pleasure Principle to Death Drive

Leaving Las Vegas tells the story of the final weeks of Ben Sanderson's life. Ben is depicted as completely alcoholic but dopedily charming. He is fired from his talent agency job in Los Angeles and quickly decides to take his severance check and move to Las Vegas to die. Ben knows he will die, and in one scene even reveals his four-week estimation for the length of his future. Once in Vegas, he nearly drives his car

¹⁹ Edelman, Lee. "The Pathology of the Future or The Endless Triumphs of Life" *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism*. (2016)

into Sera, the sex worker he falls in love with and whose loving acceptance guides the film's progression. After clumsily courting Sera on the Las Vegas strip, the two spend a paid-in-full night together in a cheap motel. There, Sera develops an unusual affection for Ben, a man whose interest in Sera is romantic but not sexual as with her clients. Ben wants only to talk with her and rambles as he drinks. His impotence is, perhaps, what makes Ben an attractive partner; it means that he wants her for something other than her sexual performance. When Ben shares his intentions with her, clarifies that the only requirement for their relationship's success is that she never ask him to stop drinking. Sera agrees as long as Ben never comments on her line of work. The agreement is signed, and the relationship continues as Ben comes closer and closer to dying of alcoholism. Perhaps the film's most jarring moment, the closing scene depicts the sole time Ben can have sex with Sera, after which he dies—with her body on top of his.



Figure 1: Still from *Leaving Las Vegas*, 1995, dir. Mike Figgis, Ben Sanderson whistles down the liquor store aisle.

Ben Sanderson's first appearance on screen is unsurprisingly drunk. The viewer watches as he pushes a grocery cart through a liquor aisle in sunglasses, whistling and dancing as he grabs bottle after bottle from the shelf and places them into the cart. The song playing during the scene drowns out the sounds of Ben's footsteps or the grocery store's sonic environment, forcing the spectator to listen carefully to what the song communicates. The song is "Angel Eyes" by Sting, and its lyrics "pretend that you don't care," suggest that behind Ben's calm exterior is a latent desire and care for something he pretends is unimportant. The cavalier indifference Ben displays in the liquor aisle is juxtaposed with the soundtrack's suggestion that his drunken nonchalance is but a pretense that masks or suppresses caring feelings and, even, investment as such.²⁰ The oscillation between indifference and investment sustains addicted desire. The first moment where Ben enjoys (the liquor aisle) is the last depiction where it appears benign. This scene belies the downward turn Ben takes just minutes later when his social world and status crumble beneath him. The whistle's placement in the opening scene, followed by Ben's tragic desperation in the next, intimate that this whistle is a death whistle—a final sonic expression indicating Ben's ultimate demise. Unconsciously careening towards death with celebratory whistling, Ben's initial appearance on screen is the first of many moments when the death drive intrudes.

Freud's death drive describes the subject's tendency to compulsively repeat behaviors or actions that ultimately harm or bring displeasure to them. Freud's 1920

²⁰ By "investment" I mean both the investment in the self as object and in the Other.

publication, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, describes this drive in relation to the repetition compulsion symptoms of World War 1 veterans and the repetitive play actions of infants in the *fort-da* game. In a casual observation, Freud notes the tendency for children to engage in repetitive play wherein the child rejoices at the reappearance of a toy only just intentionally removed from sight. The child loses the object and is distressed but reveals the object and is pleased. Even though the child repeats this action with a presumed anticipation of the toy's reappearance, the child chooses to play again and rejoices anew each time the toy returns. Of the *fort da* game Freud thus writes, "[t]his is convincing proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind" (601). In a more somber example, that of the veterans with war neuroses, Freud observes the repetitive re-experiencing of traumatic war memories in the patient's dreams, an observation that for Freud, suggests an unconscious drive to bring to the conscious mind a painful and disruptive memory. Both examples concern the subject's efforts to master unpleasurable experiences—the child attempts to master the loss of the toy to accept the potential loss of the caregiver, while the veteran attempts to master the traumatic event that disrupted his sense of being.

This significant psychic discovery altered the dominance of Freud's earlier formulation, the pleasure principle, in the subject's psychic life. While the pleasure principle describes the self-preservative economic structure of the psyche, through which tension is avoided and pleasure pursued, the death drive repeats painful

experience, whether unconsciously or consciously, acting in direct contradiction to the harmonious aims of the pleasure principle. What makes the death drive “beyond” the pleasure principle is that it aims to release tension in excess of the comfort of pain’s relief. It aims for a total absence of tension at the cost of the ego’s preservation and at the cost of pleasure itself. Towards the conclusion of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud concedes that, in fact, the pleasure principle is subservient to the death drive; “[t]he pleasure principle seems to actually serve the death instincts.”²¹ The death drive, operating at the level of the unconscious, seeks the complete absence of tension that would necessarily dissolve the ego (DeLauretis, 552). The pleasure principle thus defends the subject against the death drive’s annihilating force, protecting the ego from destruction. An integral component of the death drive, the pleasure principle combats the otherwise strong drive to self-destruct. It would be reductive, however, to deduce from this definition the assumption that the death drive’s aim is death in the literal sense. In fact, the death drive has no discernible object, it marches on without end or goal.²² While the pleasure principle allows the subject to experience temporary satisfaction, the satisfaction continuously recedes. The subject’s dissatisfaction with the pleasure principle’s goals keeps the subject searching and yearning for a final satisfying experience, the total release of tension.

Lacan expanded psychoanalysis’ understanding of the pleasure principle by highlighting the enjoyment internal to the principle itself. As the subject pursues

²¹ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pg. 63

²² Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* pg. 165

pleasure to avoid pain, they enjoy not only the pleasurable stimuli, but the experience of desiring the pleasure itself. This revision to Freud's theory complicates the seemingly rational motivation behind the pleasure principle. While Freud's dynamic describes the rational interest in pleasure over pain, Lacan insists upon the pleasures of actually failing to arrive at enduring relief.

Desire is always a desire to desire, a desire that can never be filled, a desire for a *jouissance* that can never be attained. In contrast, drive attains *jouissance* in the repetitive process of not reaching it. Failure (or the thwarting of the aim) provides its own sort of success...the subject can "find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object. Because failure produces enjoyment, because the subject enjoys via repetition, drive captures the subject. (Dean, *Blog Theory*, 40)

The *jouissance* that exists beyond the pleasure principle, around which the death drive repetitively circles, is not the drive's object, but its structuring possibility. As quoted in Lacan's seminar XI, Freud writes, "[a]s far as the object of the drive is concerned, let us be clear that it is, strictly speaking, of no importance. It is a matter of total indifference"(168). Without discernible object, the death drive is "the very opposite of dying". Rather, the moments of rapturous and excessive enjoyment the drive compels the subject to experience lead to the death of the desiring subject and therefore, the Symbolically constituted subject of meaning (DeKesel, 125). Not *really*, but *symbolically* destroyed, the subject of real enjoyment persists. Death is not a sure consequence of the subject's accession to the death drive, but as seen in *Leaving Las Vegas*, destruction is never too far off the drive's path. Tempting as it may be to call Ben suicidal, close attention to his words reveals that his intentions are only to drink.

That he might die at some point is, for Ben, just another fact of life and hardly his ultimate desire. Seated together at a restaurant, Sera asks Ben whether he intends to kill himself with drinking, and he replies sarcastically, “Or killing myself is a way to drink.” His response, as sardonic as it is, does not express suicidal desire, it expresses his awareness that drinking will lead to an early death. Drinking remains his primary intention, death is merely an afterthought, a trade-off he is willing to accept. The direct significance of his reply to Sera is not that he desires self-destruction as such, rather, it conveys his wish to drink and nothing more. As in the analytic setting, where the analysand’s words are interpreted literally, my analysis is to the letter as well. Ben’s irreversible destruction is the unconscious byproduct of his fidelity to his desire.

The film invites consideration of what appears to be Ben’s “rock bottom,” the night after he arrives drunk and embarrasses himself in front of his colleagues and their peers at a chic L.A. restaurant. He goes out that night into the city where he first finds a bar where he can continue to drink. There, he sits next to a woman. After buying her a drink, Ben brazenly asks her to come home to his place, an offer the woman uncomfortably declines. At this point Ben’s rejections are mounting at a speed close to that at which he drinks. Soon thereafter Ben briefly visits a strip club, then gets in his car and drives, bottle of vodka in hand. He notices a woman walking on the sidewalk close to him, maybe this woman will agree to come to his home. Somehow still able to operate his car, Ben slows when the sex worker approaches his vehicle and rolls the car window down to greet her. He responds to her solicitation affirmatively, with this striking phrase: “But only because I think that the concept of surrender fits with the big

picture right now.” He does not elaborate on his enigmatic justification and seems too drunk to care to. This statement communicates some possibility of surrender, whether his own or someone else’s is not yet explicit. He says “concept of surrender” rather than surrender, which suggests that Ben has little experience with conscious surrender and thinks of the act conceptually. Ben’s slurred allusion to surrender is an unconscious articulation that pursuing intimacy delivers him from *something*. While the woman at the bar would not give him the relief of surrender, this sex worker will at a price he can pay.

What does Ben release or let go of in these moments of sexual desire? If desire is that which defends the subject against *jouissance*, the unbearable enjoyment too intense to bear, then this desire for women and sexual satisfaction is one way Ben attempts, but fails, to access *jouissance*. The woman as object of desire promises Ben sustained satisfaction, but this fantasmic promise always fails and gives way to the need for someone or something else to keep him satisfied. As the film progresses it is evident that Ben relinquishes the primacy of the pleasure principle and intimate desire as he surrenders to the force of the drive. Rather than continue to defer the thing, the ultimate *jouissance* of the drive by pursuing women or love, objects of desire that offer temporary enjoyment, he concedes to the pull of the drive and encounters the shattering *jouissance* of the Real. Perhaps this scene’s moment of intimate desire and lust is Ben’s final participation in his fantasy of ever recovering objet a, which, for Ben, takes the image of a loving woman. A few scenes following his solicitation of a sex worker, we see Ben destroy his belongings in a fire as he eradicates his life to pursue his final days.

The scene gives us a few visual cues concerning the life he leaves behind; he had a wife and a child. When Ben burns a photograph of a woman and child, he incinerates not only his material possessions, but his fantasmic wish for the photograph's subjects to return to him. This scene is important for contextualizing his pursuit of women before he chooses to leave his life behind. The spectator has access to very little of Ben's life before moving to Las Vegas, and it is notable that what we do access is his presumed family.

Maybe this time, the woman will satisfy once and for all. Maybe this time the woman will stop him from renewing desires for more. Given the nature of desire's illusory promise, the maybes implied in this desperate gesture do not deliver on their promises. Desire cannot and will never give Ben what his deepest unconscious wish is, to grant that wish would foreclose his desiring capacity permanently.

As we learn, the most ethical choice Ben makes is the choice to commit fully to the drive and the tragic ends of desire itself. Rather than resist what he desires and what brings him enjoyment, Ben gives in. Though giving in to temptation is relatively ubiquitous in alcoholic desire, Ben's verbal enunciation of surrender signals a personal acceptance of his deepest experience of enjoyment. Marc De Kesel explains the subject bound by the pleasure principle and how certain modes of enjoyment surpass it:

Instead of happiness, the ultimate satisfaction of our ethical desire brings us evil and (self) destruction. Here, enjoyment can no longer be situated inside the limits of desire and the pleasure principle but is to be regarded as an exponent of the death drive. It shows how man is impelled by a drive that, in the final analysis, corresponds not with his self-preservation, but with his death (125).

Though outside the scope of the film itself, one can reasonably speculate that Ben has tried to resist his desires for the sake of his physical wellbeing or the wishes of Others. If he is anything like the typical alcoholic, as organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous would have it, he has attempted to limit his pleasures in drinking so that they stop infringing on his general well-being.²³ What DeKesel describes as enjoyment inside the limits of desire and the pleasure principle is exactly the enjoyment Ben tries to achieve in every attempt to drink normally. There is something excessive in the nature of his desire that bursts through the self-preservative function of the pleasure principle. This excess is *jouissance*, what DeKesel calls “an exponent of the death drive.” The destabilizing, excessive *jouissance* of the death drive ruptures the subject, shattering its cohesion. This rupturing threatens the subject insofar as it threatens the subject’s capacity for renewed desire, the continuation of which compels the subject to act. Desire, though ceaseless and anticipatory, does not ever result in a shattering experience of *jouissance*. Instead, the logic of desire follows the pleasure principle’s tendency towards equilibrium. From the pursuit of one object to another, the desiring subject continues unscathed, fantasizing that the next imagined object will finally satisfy desire once and for all. The *jouissance* of the drive, however, is the enjoyment inherent in the repetitive failure of desire to satisfy. While desire desires only its

²³ Chapter 3 of the *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous, “More About Alcoholism” states, “Here are some of the methods we have tried drinking beer only, limiting the number of drinks, never drinking alone, never drinking in the morning, drinking only at home, never having it in the house, never drinking during business hours, drinking only at parties, switching from Scotch to Brandy, drinking only natural wines, agreeing to resign if ever drunk on the job, taking a trip, not taking a trip, swearing it off forever, taking more physical exercise, reading inspirational books, going to health farms and sanitariums, accepting voluntary commitment to asylums---we could increase the list ad infinitum” (31).

continuation, drive pushes through enjoying the failure to satisfy itself. This final object, however, does not exist. The impossibility of desire's fulfillment is the direct consequence of the imaginary catalyst for desire's inception. What I put forth in describing desire's origin as "imaginary" is not a suggestion that desire is born out of a figment of the subject's imagination. Rather, desire is born out of the imagining of the Other's desire and is put into motion with the subject's imaginary belief that the Other desires a satisfying "something" that the subject might attain as well. Of course, for Lacan, this something does not exist and is, thus, imaginary. For the desiring subject, however, the unconscious belief in the reality of this something is what allows the subject to continue to desire and hope for satisfaction in any desired object or scenario. The structure of desire, then, suggests that there is no such thing as pure desire, it is always bound up with the imagined desire of the Other. Todd McGowan writes of desire in *The Real Gaze*:

The desiring subject emerges through its entrance into the social order, its submission to the demands of a symbolic law, a process that constitutes the subject through lack. As a being becomes a subject through its entrance into language, need transforms into desire. Unlike need, which can be directly satisfied through obtaining its object, desire orients itself around the Other and what the Other wants. This renders desire much more complicated than need and impossible to satisfy with a mere object. The desiring subject seeks the key to its lack in the field of the Other—its desire is, as Lacan frequently says, the desire of the Other. But the path of desire is infinite because the subject's desire can never line up perfectly with what the Other offers the subject (69).

In the statement of surrender the viewer witnesses Ben's conscious accession to the repetitions of the death drive, and therefore a rejection of the Other's desire. Every moment Ben resists his own wish for the desire of the Other he obscures his

unconscious truth. Each attempt to resist fails and the death drive repetitively pulls Ben into its destructive force. Surrender to the repetitions of the drive, with the awareness that pain will thus repeat, is Ben's ultimate relief.

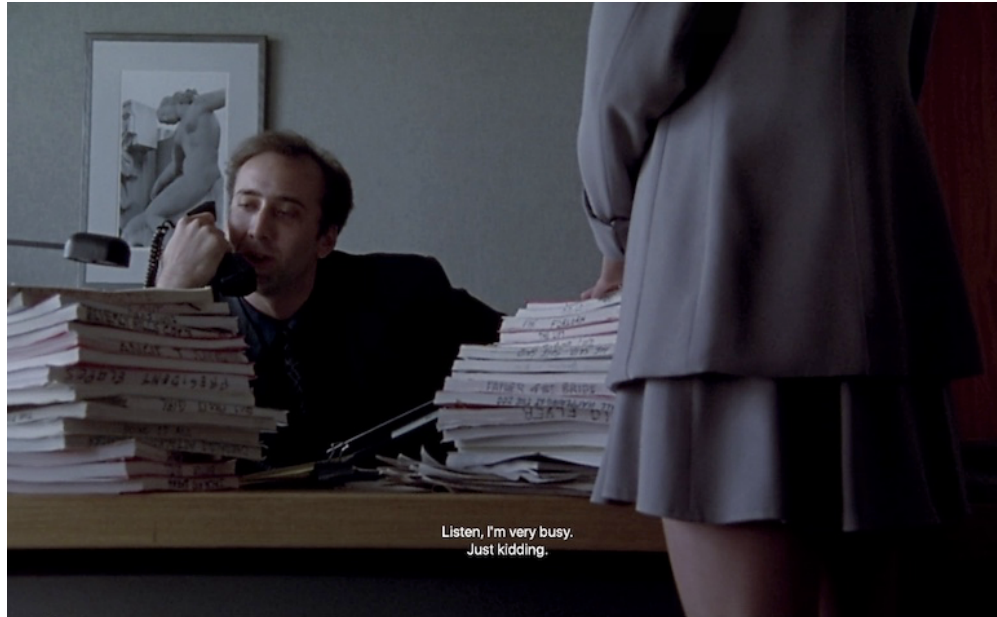


Figure 2. *Leaving Las Vegas*, 1995, dir. Mike Figgis. Ben pretends to answer a phone call at work. He says, “Listen, I’m very busy. Just kidding.”

Does the ethical act, the commitment to the Real of one’s desire at the expense of Symbolic affirmation and the promise of fantasy, include subjects who act as death driven bodies that have abandoned well-being? Todd McGowan describes the subject’s relationship to enjoyment in the context of capitalism’s organization of accumulation and pleasure:

Capitalism is a system of excess, a system functioning by appropriating the excess that workers produce, and yet it systematically erects barriers to the subject’s experience of excess... One must never enjoy excessively without regard for one’s future enjoyment: there must be no expenditure

without reserve. The problem with this capitalist ethos is its betrayal of the very nature of enjoyment. The subject cannot conserve its enjoyment or save it for tomorrow because enjoyment only exists outside the order that one would impose on it. Enjoyment is an experience of infinitude that overwhelms the subject's ability to reduce it to a calculus, which is precisely what the capitalist economy forces on the subject. In contrast, economy in the drive results in an excess of enjoyment through the enjoyment of excess. When subjects eliminate the detours that sidetrack the death drive, they experience this enjoyment of excess. (*Enjoying What We Don't Have*, 76)

Capitalism forces the subject to consider their enjoyment an immediate experience possible by accumulating commodities and capital. However, underlying this mandate is a contradiction; it prohibits excessive enjoyment that might foreclose enjoyment in the future. Not only do these contradictory mandates produce dissatisfaction for subjects, but they also betray enjoyment itself. Enjoyment emerges from the experience of lacking the enjoyable thing; one enjoys thinking and wanting the enjoyment of tomorrow. This kind of enjoyment, however, remains dissatisfying, thus forcing the subject to imagine futural moments of pleasure continually. Enjoyment at the level of the Real, or *jouissance*, is an experience so overwhelming and disruptive that it usurps the subject's well-being and ability to consider what tomorrow brings. The economics of the death drive, however, enjoy excessively without reserve and thus, prevent the death driven subject from participating in accumulation.

By the time Ben expresses a wish for surrender, the viewer does not yet know the fully death driven Ben. It is not certain whether he will proceed on a path of self-improvement or will spiral into overdose. The first few scenes of the film present what could be considered a depressed Ben, a man whose embarrassment could motivate turning over a new leaf. The scenes preceding as well as the firing scene itself, however,

are the first to depict Ben's commitment to the real of the drive. Done with wanting more, he decides to land in Las Vegas where all his desired objects wait. After his night of failed intimacy, the camera cuts to Ben at work²⁴, where he sits at his desk in a suit, talking on the phone. His vocal inflections and exaggerated affect signal to the viewer that Ben is not speaking to anyone—he is drunkenly pretending.

A woman walks toward his desk, and Ben's fabricated phone conversation becomes more elaborate and dubious when he notices his female colleague at the door. He greets her as she hands Ben a pink slip of paper; its significance does not register on Ben's face. She tries to retrieve Ben for a word with Ben's boss. Ben enthusiastically insists that he leave for a potentially lucrative meeting and dances toward her in an attempt to evade the meeting or perhaps, in genuine obliviousness. She smells the alcohol on his breath, turns away, and repeats that he is to see their boss. Before leaving, Ben fills his coffee mug with the vodka he keeps in his cabinet.

It is worth examining Ben's botched attempt at concealing his incapacitation. He pretends to speak to a client on the phone not as a jest or game but as a last effort to fulfill the Other's desire, appear more competent, and seem to fulfill the demands of the Symbolic Law. Ben imagines what the woman in the doorway wants: for his conduct to adhere to workplace rules. He seeks the key to his satisfaction in what is lacking in the workplace—his productivity. The scene does not indicate that the woman tells him to behave appropriately; she does not say anything to that effect. Demand's absence suggests that Ben pretends to be a dutiful worker because he imagines what the

²⁴ As seen in figure 2.

workplace wants from him and imagines that if he can provide it, he will be satisfied as well. As is the case for all speaking subjects, Ben's desire is the desire of the Other. However, what is interesting about Ben's performance is not simply its relation to the workplace's gaze. More interesting is that by pretending to work for the woman in the doorway, Ben recognizes that his Real desire, to drink and dance perhaps, must be concealed. Drinking and dancing will not fill the lack in the workplace, so it might not be the key to satisfaction. Ben knows that his desires and those of the woman are incompatible, and he chooses to perform her desire (what he imagines is her desire) rather than reveal his own. Of course, in the following scene, the viewer sees that Ben's boss has known Ben's desire all along. His performance is not convincing, and the pleasure principle cannot contain his alcoholic enjoyment.



Figure 3. Still from *Leaving Las Vegas*, 1995, dir. Mike Figgis. Ben's boss tells him he's being let go.

The camera cuts to black, and we enter the firing scene. The exchange is brief

and to the point; Ben shakes his boss Bill's hand, sits down across from him, and Bill tells Ben, "We're gonna let you go." A typical phrase to communicate the end of employment, "let you go," takes on a new meaning in its proximity to Ben's death driven act. Letting Ben go implies, almost too clearly, that Ben is set free. "Let," when used to direct a person's actions, connotes that the person has long wished to do what they receive permission to do. Ben, most likely, never asked to leave his job, but his actions at work communicated as much without words. His consistent errors, conscious or not, signify Ben's dissatisfaction with his employee role. The emergence of errors, or what Freud calls "bungled actions," points to an unconscious truth too traumatic to speak. Parapraxes, the technical name for bungled actions, result from a conflict between conscious and repressed desires. In the original French, Lacan's theory of the bungled action renames it "acte manqué" as a failed act. That the act is a failure is not so from the perspective of the unconscious, the failed act is, in actuality, successful. With Ben, the successful impact of his bungled drunken actions is that they "let him go." Ben could never truly act without these errors, nor could he realize the Real of his desire.



Figure 4. Still from *Leaving Las Vegas*, 1995, dir. Mike Figgis. Ben tells his boss his plan to move to Las Vegas after he is fired.

Bill hands Ben an envelope with a severance check soon after he grants Ben his freedom. From Ben's facial expression, it is evident that this check is for a substantial amount of money. Bill's generosity evokes feelings of guilt in Ben as he apologizes tearfully. Bill proceeds only by asking what he will do now that he is unemployed, let go. With haste, Ben speaks the film's title line; "I thought I'd move out to Las Vegas." Though already fifteen minutes into the film, the opening credits do not begin until Ben declares his plan to move. The film is now past its introduction, and Ben's passage to the ethical act has begun. The scenes prior to the credits provide the necessary context for Ben's decision. Delaying the title sequence a full fifteen minutes into the film is not only unusual but crucial for reading Ben as the figure of ethical action.



Figure 5. Still from *Leaving Las Vegas*, 1995, dir. Mike Figgis. The opening title card.

Ben Sanderson and the Ethical Act

Before leaving, Ben triumphantly packs all of his belongings into garbage bags and lights his paperwork, photos, and memories on fire. The camera zooms into a burning photograph of what looks like Ben, his child, and his former wife in the blaze. His decision to move to Las Vegas is the inciting decision that leads Ben to carry out Jacques Lacan's ethical act. Ben leaves his job and his home and intentionally incinerates the significations that bear the trace of his former being. Ben's death-driven alcoholism is the kernel at the center of this act and were it not for his staunch determination to drink; Ben might not ever act in the truly ethical sense.

The act in psychoanalysis, first according to Lacan and then Zizek, is the subject's steadfast commitment to the Real of their desire, a commitment that results in devastating consequences for the subject –a position Jacques Lacan calls "subjective destitution." When the subject observes the failure of the Other to support the subject's

identity and understanding of the world, the subject realizes that, according to the notable Lacanian phrase, the Other does not exist. When the Other disappears, the subject does as well. The viewer meets Ben during his process of realization regarding the Other's imaginary status. He is alone and without romance, his job refuses to condone his drinking, and thus, his worldly identifications begin to fall away. Without the support of identification, psychoanalysis dictates that the subject is simply nothing. The ego forms through a process of identification, first with the mOther, then with the mirror image. Both of these identifications are possible only because the subject imagines the Other's wholeness and, in doing so, the subject believes that he is whole too. Because the ego is fundamentally tied to the Other, once the Other's inconsistency and lack appear to the subject, the subject no longer has a foundation for their own identity. When Ben loses his job, his final identification, he occupies the position of subjective destitution. Significantly, once destitute, Ben does not instantly self-destruct. Instead, he goes forth to Las Vegas, where he can exist authentically as the Real subject of the drive. The enjoyment of the Real of desire often accompanies the repetition of a loss. Withstanding the loss of social identity and Symbolic status, the subject who acts transforms the surrounding symbolic structure. Insistence on whatever the subject's unconscious desire may be, even if it manifests destructively, is psychoanalysis's form of ethics. Acting so tenaciously at the expense of one's identity and status opens up the space for symbolic change. The act allows the subject to be free from subjectivity's deadlock.

After living in Las Vegas and falling in love with Sera for an indeterminate

length of time, one cannot imagine it is more than a few weeks, Ben's alcoholic fate draws closer to the horizon. Sera remains attached to him, despite discovering his brief one-night stand of betrayal and withstanding his general decline in health. One evening when his ailing and sweaty body seems to be at its last moments, he lays in bed with a teary Sera. She is distraught and desperate for his recovery. His withdrawals, coupled with what appears to be poisoning, make their final rounds in his bloodstream. Nonetheless, Ben and Sera make love. Sera initiates what is, perhaps, one of the most tragic love scenes in cinema. Sera is distraught at the sight of Ben's ailing body, and she cries as he compliments her, calling her his angel. After they make love, Sera falls asleep. Ben's gasp wakes her, and she turns to see him seizing. He passes shortly thereafter.

For Žižek, as for Lacan, it is the death-drive that is at work in the authentic Act, and so for both thinkers the Act is a purely negative category; it offers a way for the subject to break out of the limits of Being; it opens the gap of negativity, of a void prior to its being filled in. (*The Zizek Dictionary*, "Act" Shiela Kunkle, 4)

Many alcoholism films illustrate the dejected drunk in this same circumstance. What makes *Leaving Las Vegas* different from these films is that it constructs a narrative where the alcoholic acts outside of the realm of the Other, in the register of the Real. Ben cuts his ties to the Symbolic order, is no longer ashamed of his alcoholism, and, "feels compelled to embrace—the destructive energies of the Real."²⁵ The choice he makes, however, is not to move to Sin City, it is actually to continue

²⁵ Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, pg. 50

drinking in the way he prefers and is compelled. His relocation is the finale of the series of acts that took place after his commitment to addicted desire. The extent to which Ben consciously commits to addiction is negligible, no doubt, but once his unconscious commitment to drinking exceeds the pleasure principle, he heads towards addiction's *jouissance*.²⁶ This is the provocative essence of the ethics of psychoanalysis, the ethical act.

I have described the psychoanalytic interpretation of “bungled actions” or the “acte manqué” as it unfolds in Ben’s transgressions. These slips that constitute the category called addiction are, for psychoanalysis, manifestations of an unconscious desire. The ethics of psychoanalysis locate the subject’s truth in their unconscious formations. The Lacanian ethical dictum, “the only thing that one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one’s desire,” describes the guilty subject as one who ignores the truth inherent in their bungled, self-destructive and repetitive symptoms and who depends on the Other to determine their desires. The ethical subject, however, takes responsibility for and claims the truth of their unconscious manifestations, and proceeds to act accordingly. Ben burns the images and signifiers of his former, unethical self, the ashamed Ben who tries to fill the lack in the Other. It is not as though Ben embarks on a hedonist’s spree, that would designate his acts as perverse in the psychoanalytic sense.²⁷ Ben does not wish to be the object for the Other, nor does he

²⁶ DeKesel, *Eros and Ethics*, pg. 161

²⁷ Lacan’s understanding of perversion is the structure of desire that works entirely for the enjoyment of the Other, not of the subject itself. The perverted subject wishes to be the object of the Other’s *jouissance*. See *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (185)

desire an object for himself. He does not escape, he escapes from the idea of escape—he loses his investment in the fantasy of a world without trauma and loss.²⁸ When Ben burns these signifiers, he Symbolically cuts their ties to his desire, and begins to act *without guilt*.

²⁸ Todd McGowan, “Subject of the Event, Subject of the Act”, 2010, pg. 11

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