

Homo Addictus

Steven Connor

A text prepared for the workshop *Investigating the Intoxication of the Senses: Pleasure, Poison and Perception, 1600-Present*, CRASSH, University of Cambridge, 24 October 2012.

I propose to define the ‘intoxication of the senses’ referred to in the title of this symposium, as an intensification or exaltation of sensory pleasure tending towards an extreme of insensibility. Such experiences are typified in the use of drugs, in particular and characteristically alcohol, but are not restricted to them; they might include, for example, experiences of religious, sexual, ludic, or even philosophical ecstasy. The most important, and perhaps the least familiar part of this definition is not the nature or degree of the sensory intensification, but the direction in which it tends, namely towards an extreme condition in which what has seemed capable of indefinite expansion or intensification actually vanishes from experience, literally in unconsciousness, as it may be, but also in conditions of unawareness with relation to the pleasure or its sensory form themselves. We might pay closer attention than we do to the sub-dialects of intoxication, which seem to abound in most languages. The fact that so many expressions for intoxication indicate the annihilation of faculties is particularly telling in this respect; one seeks to be bombed, stoned, smashed, pie-eyed, plastered or wasted, the aim seemingly being to be completely ‘out of it’ (the idea of completeness or absoluteness, as in ‘completely off his/her head/face’ is also often to the fore in such expressions). One seeks an experience so intense that it is actually beyond experiencing, since the intoxicated subject is in a sense no longer there any more to experience it. Perhaps the ideal form of, or, rather, moment in, intoxicatory experience would be something like Shelley’s ‘fading coal’ of poetic inspiration, in which one is just sufficiently in the experience which is causing one inexorably to pass out of ordinary awareness, being just sufficiently in one’s head to be able to apprehend how out of it one in fact is.

With this definition in mind, I would like here to broach two propositions. The first is that our contemporary understanding and experience of intoxication is tightly twinned to that of addiction. For us, it seems, the risk or likelihood of addiction is what is most toxic about intoxication. What we fear is not being invaded or overcome by some poisonous alien influence but the fact of our own desire becoming toxic or alien to us. The regularity of this correlation may seem natural, but it is in fact new, and is by no means a feature of all the cultures who have valued and cultivated forms of intoxication. Intoxication may always been seen as a danger or temptation, but it has not always seemed to carry with it the specific risk that it does for us of addiction.

Addiction to intoxicants is oxymoronic in the sense that, rather than being the opposite of the habitual or the everyday, the experience of intoxication, or at least the desire for it, becomes habitual or quotidian. Intoxication is by its nature radically discontinuous. Addiction may be seen as the attempt to secure the discontinuous

intensity of intoxication (on which, of course, it depends for its force) as a continuously-available possibility. This opens on to my second proposition, namely that intoxication is an essentially temporal phenomenon, such that the struggle between intoxication and addiction takes the form of temporality itself. How?

Intoxication is episodic, epochal. It involves the convulsion or suspension of time. Social time in pre-modern societies has traditionally been regarded by ethnologists as given tone and texture by the eruptions of what Durkheim famously called 'effervescence', by periods of intense agitation, experienced collectively, or, perhaps, rather, induced by collectivity itself. For the indigenous Australians whom Durkheim studied in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, collectivity was itself occasional rather than continuous, and its intoxicating effects were the result of this: 'The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated by their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation' (Durkheim 2001, 162). The concentration in space of the normally dispersed tribe or people parallels and enables the concentration of time itself. If in one sense the experience of ceremony or ritual is eruptive, in that it tears apart the ordinary continuum of social time, in another sense it can be seen as powerfully cohering. The characteristic of ordinary time (for which one does not need a concept of the specifically modern, urban 'everyday', since it is what is whatever forms the unmarked background to sacred or festival time), is that in it time *passes*, and thereby distances and diffuses the things subject to it. In festival and effervescence, by contrast, time solidifies, seeming to be powerfully condensed, or funnelled inwards on itself. In contemporary societies, it seems, collectivity is continuous, even if it is rare for it to become actual and immediate (paradoxically, only mediation allows anything like the entire nation to participate even in huge events like sporting encounters), seeming to make it possible for exaltation to take more regular and regulated forms. This gives a clue to what I will want to show is the characteristically addictive relation that modern societies have towards experiences of intoxication

Intoxication has always had a bad or dubious reputation. Just as there seem to be no cultures that are entirely without experiences of the sacred, of intensity, transcendence, or the suspension of profane time, so there are no cultures that can be dedicated to or organised exclusively around such intensities of experience. When it becomes an everyday indulgence, immoderate, or too immediate, pleasure is deprecated as lust, luxury, enthusiasm or simple madness. For, just as it is not possible to maintain a social structure without occasional confirming conflagrations of sacred intensity, so it is impossible to maintain it on nothing but intensity. All cultures must exercise forms of moderating influence on the immoderate pleasures that may nevertheless give them their distinctive form and expression. In all such cultures, therefore, the experiences of intensity typified by intoxication are at once corrosive and constitutive, since they punctuate and underpin social order, while needing themselves to be subject to social ordering. The compromise between singularity and series, or event and structure, effected by many religions is the sacrament, which allows exaltation to be recalled if not at will, then at regular

intervals, in the calendar of feasts and holidays, which draws effervescence into time, and temporalises intoxication. The structural problem of which addiction is the local sign is that we are so apt and able to make continuous such occasional and intermittent forms of exaltation.

Peter Sloterdijk has brought forward a highly original set of arguments about anger which may have some salience in thinking about patterned or systematic intoxication (indeed anger may perhaps be thought of as a representative form of intoxication). As Sloterdijk shows in his *Rage and Time* (*Zorn und Zeit*), the problem both for political movements and for the religious movements from which they borrow their forms, affects and guiding narratives, is how to maintain anger at a usefully exalted pitch. Politics comes into being from a usurpation by human agents of the desire for vengeance for injustice which in Christianity is arrogated by the Almighty ('Vengeance is mine, I will repay', *est mihi vindictam, ego retribuam*, Romans 12.19). But arousing anger is only the first, and more trivial problem. For anger leads quickly to spontaneous discharge – indeed, anger may exist simply in order to bring about its own discharge, thereby accelerating action. The second, and more structural problem, is how to maintain anger at a high pitch, delaying that spontaneous discharge to which anger leads. Sloterdijk proposes that political programmes and institutions, especially of a revolutionary or strongly reformist kind, may be thought of as forms of anger management, the aim of which, however, is not to keep anger down, but rather to keep it on the boil, and constantly available, but at manageable levels. They are, at the same time, ways of giving long-term scansion to time, the deferred desire for vengeance in particular creating 'a vector that creates a tension between then, now, and later' (Sloterdijk 2010, 60).

Political institutions function as 'anger banks' for Sloterdijk. Given the tendency of all spasms of effervescence to diffuse quickly, we may suppose that there are many other kinds of affect-capitalisations, which attempt to stockpile and manage forms of affective excess. We might posit, in particular, a kind of capitalisation of intoxication, for example in the many forms of promised or purchasable rapture held out by advertising and media. Consumers have always been promised pleasure, but perhaps never before have those pleasures been so regularly represented as ecstatic and delirious, and never before have we been promised and promised each other so much 'amazement', 'astonishment', or 'knock-out' experiences. This is a cultivation, not just of sensory intensity or heightening, but of the pleasures of nihilation or oblivion as the superlative form of excess, an intensifying of sensation that passes paradoxically into insensibility, thereby conforming to my opening definition of intoxication. What characterises the pleasures of what is called 'consumption', is that we appear to be enjoined to experience those pleasures as all-consuming. For this reason, 'consumer' does not at all seem like the right term, since we are invited to imagine our pleasures and desires consuming us, rather than we them. One need think only of the extraordinary inflation of the terms 'passion' or 'passionate' in contemporary public discourse. There is no preference or predilection – for athletics, as it might be, or antirrhinums – that may reasonably be described as something you quite like or on the whole prefer; nor are there any attachments too mild or

inconstant to be represented as something for which one has a settled ‘passion’, to which one rapturously consigns oneself (the literal meaning of ‘ad-diction’) as to an immolating furnace. Intoxication suggests invasion, adulteration – the vitiation or enslavement of the self by something intrinsic. But, in fact, in the state of addiction, there is no possibility of a relation to anything extrinsic, precisely because there no longer is anything that could be thought of as intrinsic. So taken up or consumed is the addict in his or her project, that there are in fact no objects possible; no relations between subject and object can subsist when there is no difference between them, when the subject has become identical with its own objective of attaining unbeing. The addict can have no desire for the object, since the addict’s self is simply a container or occasion for the desire which it cannot ever *have* exactly, since it *is* it, without residue or reserve.

Not all cultures live in, or live out the paradoxical intersections of the sacred and the profane in the same way. In particular, the cultures of abundance that have come into being in Europe, America and elsewhere over the last century have created a very distinctive form of the intertwining of intensity and order. A culture of abundance is a very different thing, of course, from a prosperous culture. A prosperous culture will typically show a wide diffusion of its material well-being, while a culture of abundance is compatible with great extremes of misery and deprivation. Addiction furnishes a very good example of this extreme. The poor suffer many kinds of deprivation, but, for much of history, their very poverty for the most part saves them from the ravages of abundance. Most of the citizens of the Roman empire did not need to worry unduly about how to develop the faculties of moral and material self-moderation preached by Marcus Aurelius, since only a minority were so affluent that self-curtailment might have a survival value. In today’s cultures of abundance, the wretched of the earth may be wretched not only because of what they lack, but because of what has been made too easily available to them. It is possible it seems, to be deprived even of what have sometimes been the advantages of deprivation. Alcohol addiction has, of course, been a constant feature of many forms of poverty for centuries, but the cultures of abundance have seen an explosive increase in addictions and dependencies of all kinds. Where most cultures have been organised around the principle of scarcity, we might say, cultures of abundance are increasingly dependent upon the dependencies of their citizens. The fact that, in cultures of abundance, huge quantities and varieties of material goods and experiences are in principle and fact within the reach of a very large proportion of the population can produce something like an inflation of the sacred, as the value of experiences that might in traditional societies have been concentrated discontinuously in the occasional excesses of festival time become permanent and continuous. With every night, or even every lunchtime, able to be a Friday night, addiction may be is the result and expression of this routinisation of the transcendent.

I can, of course, scarcely claim to be the first to see a link between material abundance and mutations of social temporality. Along with many others, Richard Terdiman, in his *Present Past*, argues that, just as ‘the experience of commodification

and the process of reification cut entities off from their own history' (Terdiman 1993, 12), so desire for those commodities fragments the experience of continuous time and therefore the possibility of extended or abiding memory. More recently, Ronald Schleifer's *Modernism and Time* has proposed a link between the 'logic of abundance' and the shattering of something he describes as 'the unending future of ongoing Newtonian time' (Schleifer 2000, 5), such that experiences of scattered intensity come to matter more than long-term atemporal consistencies or transtemporal evolutions. I am not myself persuaded that the deep and continuous forms of time dreamt of or up by theorists of commodification have ever in fact been strongly present for anyone very much, except by back-formation. But, in any case, the suggestion I want to make is that, in many recent societies of abundance, there is an intoxication-addiction, which is to be understood both as fragmenting and as freezing time.

In a sense, addiction can be seen as a simple profaning of transcendence, for that which is continuously available can no longer be thought of as a transcendent irruption of the sacred into profane quotidian time. Where intoxication is spasmodic, ecstatic, transgressive, dissolving and uplifting, addiction seems to be permanent, anxious, conservative, fixating and immiserating. But they in fact bring about the same kind of temporality, in that both disallow temporal deepening or accretion. In addiction, discontinuity becomes continuous, and distraction exerts a permanent traction. It is in the nature of intoxication to suspend time, but, by being repeated at regular intervals, these suspensions may become the very means of measuring and therefore binding time (in both senses – time itself subject being subject to binding, and time as binding its addicted subjects).

Peter Sloterdijk sees little possibility now of successful long-term elongations and coordinations of collectivised anger, even though the multiplication of 'energetic, thymotic, irritable actors' (Sloterdijk 21010, 229) actually makes the likelihood of local eruptions of rage more likely than ever; only complex, localised, permanently on-call forms of anger-management are likely to work, and perhaps likely is too optimistic a word. We may surmise that similar conditions may apply to questions of intoxication, where the problem is, if anything, even more intricate. For the linking of intoxication and addiction means that it is not just the effects of disruptive excess, or violent desire (with the concomitant desire for violence) that have to be managed, though they assuredly do; it is also that, forced into addictive cycles, intoxication exerts a binding effect on temporality as well as a scattering or dispersive effect, producing in its subject a kind of passionate lassitude, which is incapable either of being fully distracted or directed.

If intoxication tends toward insensibility and addicts seek to maximise or make permanent the extremes of intoxication, it seems to make sense to think of the addictive condition as one of lowered pleasure and diminishing sensory returns. But this may not quite capture the quality of addiction. For what addiction essentially means is not just that it becomes harder and harder to break out of everydayness into the desired condition of exaltation, but rather that exaltation passes into everydayness. It might similarly be assumed that the risk of addiction is

proportional to the intensity of the intoxicatory pleasure, such milder pleasures seem to carry less risk of addiction. But this is to ignore one of the most idiosyncratic features of addiction, which is the displacement of the pleasure of intoxication into the pleasure-ensuring routines of the addict. The result is not a transfiguration of the everyday, but its converse, which might be called the impassioned of habit. For habit itself to have become impassioned as it does for the addict, means that overcoming the addiction does not mean forgoing one kind of pleasure alone, that forms an episode in a life, but rather the forgoing of a whole life, which has been refashioned according to the narrowed project of achieving conditions of intoxication – and this may begin to provide a kind of intoxication in itself. The word ‘habit’ as used in relation to the addiction to particular chemical dependencies has always struck me as incongruously mild, as though a £200 per day heroin habit could be compared to seemingly take-it-or-leave it habits like parting your hair on the left, or taking your tea with lemon. But there is a kind of purchase in this term too, given the impassioned of habit itself in addiction, where ‘impassioned’ does not necessarily mean giving passionate pleasure, but indicates the fact that the habit has a kind of urgency or intensity. When habit becomes project and ordeal, it develops its own intoxicating force. So we may say that there are some conditions in which habit incurs or encourages intoxication, as well as intoxication carrying the risk of habit. The tightness of the intoxication-addiction compact means that intoxication is not just an experience to which you run the risk of becoming addicted; it can also be the after-effect of becoming addicted to something, including perhaps to addiction itself. These are not so much habits of intoxication as habits in search of intoxication.

Addiction therefore is a kind of temporising, and time itself a kind of addiction. Intoxication aims at timelessness, seeming to be antitemporal, but the very desire to make a routine of such time-suspensions infects intoxication with time, and perhaps intoxicates temporality itself.

There is no better dramatisation of the derangements of time brought about by the compounding of ordeal and exaltation in addiction than the section early in *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Foster Wallace’s great novel of pleasure and dependence, in which the addict Erdedy awaits the arrival of his dealer with 200 grams of high quality marijuana. Wallace’s aim in the novel is in part to show us the skull beneath the skin of addictive pleasure, his title recalling Hamlet’s revulsion at the mouldy death’s-head to which the jester Yorick, and the delight he gave to the young Hamlet, has been reduced: ‘I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at it’ (*Hamlet*, 5.1). But Wallace’s novel pushes further than this. For, if the experience of addiction were simply that of the souring or decay into loathing of intoxication, there would be little difficulty in abandoning the desire for it. But the logic of addiction makes short work of this dichotomy between pleasure and unpleasure, one of its virtuoso ruses being its capacity to bend unpleasure to its own ends. For Erdedy, like the many other addicts who throng the thronging pages of *Infinite Jest*, intoxication means binging, locking himself away for

days at a time, smoking joint after joint, masturbating compulsively and watching TV without a break. The ostensible aim of this immoderate over-consumption is actually to bring his dependency to an end:

He'd simply smoke so much so fast that it would be so unpleasant and the memory of it so repulsive that once he'd consumed it and gotten it out of his home and his life as quickly as possible he would never want to do it again. He would make it his business to create a really bad set of debauched associations with the stuff in his memory... This last time he would smoke the whole 200 grams - 120 grams cleaned, destemmed - in four days, over an ounce a day, all in tight heavy economical one-hitters off a quality virgin bong, an incredible, insane amount per day, he'd make it a mission, treating it like a penance and behavior-modification regimen all at once (Wallace 2012, 22)

The whole episode is a wonderful enactment of the entanglement of addiction and abandonment, in which the very means by which the addict convinces himself that he is employing to release himself from his dependency are a way of deepening it. Wallace makes the routine of intoxication exactly equivalent to that of TV viewing, or, in the near-future he projected in 1996, the viewing of cartridges. Erdedy's repeated farewell dope orgies are associated with epically prolonged bouts of masturbation, that leave his organ rawly inoperative, and endless watching of entertainment tapes.

He was unable to distract himself with the TP because he was unable to stay with any one entertainment cartridge for a few seconds. The moment he recognized exactly what was on one cartridge he had a strong anxious feeling that there was something more entertaining on another cartridge and that he was potentially missing it. (Wallace 2012, 26)

In his condition of inert agitation, fidgety, restless and formicating (a central focus of attention in the episode is an insect repeatedly glimpsed on Erdedy's bookshelf), unable to build or move purposively toward any outcome but the looked-for arrival of the dealer, and yet also locked together by compulsion, the longing for that which is 'to come' means that there is no possibility of the advent of any actual future (*avenir*) that is not just a churning of the ongoing agony of anticipation that inundates the present.

Academic writing has not been immune from these effects, and from the simultaneous heightening and lowering produced by the addiction-intoxication cycle. Indeed, a certain strain of critical-utopian academic discourse has made experiences of intoxication its central principle. What is meant here is rarely, of course, literal intoxication, but rather figural or intellectual forms of Romantic or Dionysian frenzy, or Rimbaudian derangement of the senses. There is, for example, the 'delirium' that is provided by a healthy kind of literature, according to Gilles Deleuze; where Durkheim proposes an effervescence formed in and formative of a

people, Deleuze proposes a delirium that would be molecular rather than molar, creating not a dominative unity, but 'a minor people, eternally minor, taken up in a becoming-revolutionary' (Deleuze 1998, 4). Delirium is diseased 'whenever it erects a race it claims is pure and dominant', but is a form of health 'when it invokes this oppressed bastard race that ceaselessly stirs beneath dominations' (Deleuze 1998, 4).

There are many other allotropes of intoxication in the periodic table of critical-utopian concepts, meaning that not only is excess intoxicating, but there is also an excess of forms of intoxication. There is, for example, the dream of the pure madness, wholly outside structures of rationality, to which Foucault hoped to give a voice. There is also the theory of the gift, or the idea of a pure gratuity, beyond any possibility of economic exchange. Related to this, there is the Lyotardian principle of absolute incommensurability, of that which has no way of being measured or compared in relation to anything else. The Maussian principle of pure and unproductive expenditure becomes in Bataille the engine of every kind of transcendent rapture and sado-masochistic suffering. More recently, in the work of Badiou and Žižek, we hear routinely of the 'event', which is supposed to have no relation to or possibility of determination by any preceding structure of thought. Underpinning all these willed intellectual effervescences, though perhaps too shy, in our more hard-bitten age of moral zealotry, to speak its name aloud, is the principle of *jouissance*, which in the 1970s we were taught was to be preferred in all ways and on all occasions, to its dutiful, drearily utilitarian twin-sister, pleasure. Compared with the bliss of *jouissance* - which Barthes archly assured his readers even extends to 'the point of a certain boredom', presumably if cultivated assiduously enough (Barthes 1975, 14) - the contemptible litotes of quite liking something, or finding it rather enjoyable, was a miserable and oppressive failure of nerve.

What these intoxication-concepts have in common is the idea of a transcending of relationality. All of them involve what might be regarded as a kind of intoxication of thought, in the sense of a willed lifting of rationality out of the conditions of relationality that ordinarily apply to it, a forcing of thought to encompass a condition of absolute discontinuity, released from all determinations, and therefore, in a sense, a forcing of thought into a condition of release from itself - in short, an intoxication. Naturally, this is a paradoxically 'pure' kind of intoxication, one that does not involve the adulteration of pure reason by various contaminants so much as the production of absolute concepts purified of all relationality, since they must be defined negatively, through absence rather than positive qualities.

The production of such cognitive intoxications is, of course, bizarrely paradoxical, since it involves the systematic production and reproduction of principles or phenomena that are alleged and required to go beyond structure, system, relationality, and so forth. We may describe this as an addictive relationship, insofar as it partakes of the same deeply paradoxical conditions of the addict, who is forced to make a 24/7 commitment or career-choice of his devotion to various forms of escape or transcendence. Given its liability both to intoxication and addiction, philosophy has been oddly inattentive to such matters. One exception, the

marginality of which is proof of the rule, is William James's reflections on nitrous oxide and Hegelian dialectics, to which I have given some attention (Connor 2010).

If we are pervaded and governed by a logic of addiction, how are we to distinguish addiction from the kinds of thing it may seem both to resemble and to permit – for example, commitment, or devotion? There may, to be sure, be no foolproof ways of making out the difference, at least in advance. Perhaps the only measure would be the productiveness of the form of assignment in either case. To be productive might here mean to be capable of giving rise determinately to what nevertheless could not wholly have been predicted. The dream of the wholly unpredictable or wholly indeterminate partakes of a certain kind of intoxication; the dream of the wholly predictable belongs to the logic of addiction. Stuck in a condition of permanent emergency, addiction permits nothing to emerge. In its efforts to dominate time, addiction, like the intoxication around which it orbits, obliterates it. Devotion, by contrast, by holding to things in time, may give way to time, and so give time a way to come about and things a way to come about in time.

References

- Barthes, Roland (19175). *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Connor, Steven (2010). *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal*. London: Reaktion.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1998). *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. London: Verso.
- Durkheim, Emile (2001). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Trans. Carol Cosman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schleifer, Ronald (2000). *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880-1930*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sloterdijk, Peter (2010). *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*. Trans. Mario Wenning. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Terdiman, Richard (1993). *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wallace, David Foster (2012). *Infinite Jest: A Novel*. London: Abacus.