

Trainspotting: a psychoanalytic perspective of drug addiction in contemporary society

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The use of substances considered toxic is an ancient practice found in different peoples and cultures. However, in each civilization or time, drug has a different purpose. In contemporary society, drug use is related to the way of life and the prevailing ideals in the social context, fundamentally characterized by the culture of narcissism and spectacle. From this drug conception in modernity and the assumption that human subjectivity and pathologies are built from articulations of cultural relationships with the subject's individual history, this article aims to discuss the drug addiction phenomenon in contemporary society through vignettes of the film *Trainspotting*. To support this argument, the psychoanalytic theory approach is used.

Descriptors: Drug Addiction; Psychoanalysis; Contemporaneity; Narcisism.

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Trainspotting: Uma perspectiva psicanalítica da toxicomania na contemporaneidade

O uso de substâncias consideradas tóxicas consiste em uma prática milenar presente em diferentes povos e culturas. Todavia, em cada civilização ou época, a droga apresenta uma finalidade diferente. Na contemporaneidade o uso de drogas está relacionado ao modo de vida e aos ideais vigentes no contexto social, caracterizado fundamentalmente por uma cultura do narcisismo e do espetáculo. Partindo dessa concepção de droga presente na atualidade e do pressuposto de que a subjetividade humana e as patologias são construídas a partir de articulações das relações culturais com a história individual do sujeito, o presente artigo tem como objetivo discutir o fenômeno da toxicomania na contemporaneidade através de vinhetas do filme Trainspotting. Para fundamentar essa discussão, utilizará o referencial teórico psicanalítico.

Descritores: Toxicomania; Psicanálise; Contemporaneidade; Narcisismo.

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El uso de sustancias consideradas tóxicas consiste en una práctica milenaria presente en diferentes pueblos y culturas. Todavía, en cada civilización o época, la droga presenta una finalidad diferente. En la contemporaneidad el uso de drogas está relacionado al modo de vida y a los ideales vigentes en el contexto social, caracterizado fundamentalmente por una cultura del narcisismo y del espectáculo. Partiendo de esa concepción de droga presente en la actualidad y del presupuesto de que la subjetividad humana y las patologías son construidas desde articulaciones de las relaciones culturales con la historia individual del sujeto, el presente artículo tiene como objetivo discutir el fenómeno de la toxicomanía en la contemporaneidad a través de viñetas del film Trainspotting. Para fundamentar esa discusión, utilizará el referencial teórico psicanalítico.

Descriptores: Adicción a las Drogas; Psicoanálisis; Contemporáneo; Narcisismo.

Introduction

Drug use is not a new practice. The use of substances considered toxic is an ancient practice found in different peoples and cultures. However, in each civilization or time, drug has a different purpose within that group.

In primitive societies, the use of these substances was related to certain mythical rituals. Heretofore, in ancient societies, drug was intended for various purposes, such as part of religious rituals, therapeutic purpose, recreation, among others⁽¹⁾. In the Middle Ages, with the advent of Christian ethics, toxic substances became immoral and sinful, and therefore, forbidden⁽¹⁾.

In modernity, with the implementation of the capitalist production and the emergence of science, the use of toxic substances was no longer reprehensible and their medicinal value was legitimized⁽¹⁾. From the nineteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution, drug use takes on a new form of expression, which is related to the way of life and ideals prevailing in this new social context. Drugs, both licit and illicit, became consumer objects, which, as other objects, had the purpose to provide pleasure at any cost⁽¹⁾.

Nowadays, this association between drug use and consumption is still a reality. The contemporary or postmodern society presents as imperative consumption and the need to live without any pain. This has caused great impact on current pathologies, including drug addiction. From this conception of drug in modernity, many authors characterize modern society fundamentally by a culture of narcissism and spectacle, where individualism and the subject's self-centeredness acquire enormous proportions. There is a gradual disappearance of the other, which takes the pleasure of the postmodern subject to be reduced to a narcissistic investment⁽²⁾.

Thus, before this new context, in clinical psychoanalysis are observed symptomatology that do not follow the logic of conflict, repression and representation, but pathologies with narcissistic picture, that is, the action order. In them there is no presence of a representative construction; the drive is discharged in the act or in the body and therefore they are called by many authors as psychopathologies of the act⁽³⁾. They are considered as belonging to this group of narcissism diseases, or act, depression, anorexia, obesity, bulimia, panic disorder and drug addiction. Conserving their peculiarities, they have as common element demonstrations that focus on the body and the action, as their main feature is the constitutive narcissistic absence⁽³⁻⁴⁾.

Thus, starting from the conception of drug in contemporaneity and the assumption that human subjectivity and pathologies are built from the merge of cultural relationships with the subject's individual history, this article aims to discuss the drug addiction phenomenon in contemporary society using vignettes of the film *Trainspotting*.

Importantly, we do not advocate the conception that these pathologies have emerged with the contemporaneity. We find that they previously existed; however, the current culture has favored both the increase in these pathologies and the emergence of new symptomatology, in which the psychic

development gives way to action, involving subjects who have a considerable narcissistic frailty.

It is also important to note that not all drug consumption may be understood as a narcissistic disorder. The psychic functioning of drug addicts differs from the recreational drug user, considering that this individual uses the substances in their times of trouble or fun, consuming them regularly or irregularly, but drugs are not the main reason of their existence⁽⁵⁾.

The choice of the 1996 film *Trainspotting*, an eponymous novel adaptation of Irvine Welsh to the cinema, occurred because of its great relationship with the psychoanalytical concepts used in this article to understand the phenomenon of drug addiction.

Drug in Freud and Lacan

Freud has not specifically dedicated to the drug theme, although the use and abuse of toxic substances appear in some periods throughout his work. The main meanings attributed to drug addiction by Freud were in the pre-psychoanalytic period, prior to 1900. Analyzing these texts of Freudian theory, drug use is associated with dependency in general.

In his *Letter to Fliess on January 11th, 1897*, the author presents a concern with the source of the toxic component of passions in general, referring to dipsomania (Impulse to drink alcohol beverage) as a replacement of sexual impulse. Thus, it can be observed that this text talks about a primitive sexual drive that would be on the basis of other toxic drives⁽⁶⁾.

In the *Letter to Fliess on December 22nd, 1897*, Freud makes his major contribution to answering the question on the origin of addiction, especially masturbation, presenting it as a prototype of addictions, that is, he highlights masturbation as the first addiction: "I realized that masturbation is the greatest habit, the 'primary addiction', and that only as a substitute for it other addictions --- alcohol, morphine, tobacco, etc. --- acquire existence"⁽⁷⁾. Thus, various addictions or compulsions are approximate to masturbation, which is considered a self-erotic behavior, that is, a sexual behavior in which the subject uses only their own body⁽⁷⁾. Later, another Freud's text, which can be used to understand the meaning of the drug to the subject, is the *Malaise in Civilization*. Although the author has not specifically referred to this issue in the text, he presents the idea of *palliative measures*, that is, ways that the subject finds to support the malaise caused by civilization, which in exchange for security, forces the subject to sacrifices regarding sexuality

and aggressiveness inherent to the human being⁽⁸⁾: “Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; giving us much suffering, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to handle with it, we cannot delete palliative measures. [...] There might be three measures of this type: powerful derivatives, which make us draw light out of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and toxic substances, which make us insensitive to it⁽⁹⁾.”

In this sense, Freud considers intoxication as the crudest palliative measures and the most effective in providing a malaise reduction before the demand of resignation of instinctive satisfaction of the drive, because the drug, by influencing the body and changing its chemical, promotes effects on the body, acting as a damper of concerns, which leads the individual to move away from the pressure of reality. Thus, the function of the drug is understood as a substitute of satisfaction of the drive, a solution the subject has found to deal with the very suffering of the culture⁽⁹⁾.

When Freud refers to drugs as palliative measures, he conveys the idea that drug use would be an effort of psychic economy in finding the shortest path to pleasure. The effect of drugs on the psyche would cause a regression of the libido to earlier stages of development, as the primary narcissism⁽¹⁰⁾. Therefore, to understand the phenomenon of drug addiction, the primary narcissism described by the author is presented as a key concept.

What is at risk in relation to drug addiction is not only the experience of pleasure that the toxic substance causes the body, but an experience of pleasure correlative to interference caused by the drug in the position of the subject towards the object or reality, a type of pleasure that can be described as narcissist⁽¹⁰⁾. This search to return to an unlimited pleasure, characteristic of primary narcissism, can be understood as the choice of a path which is always shorter by shortcuts that avoid reality and unpleasantness, but that also leads to dismantling one's own psychic and instinctive life⁽¹⁰⁾.

Thus, it can be said that at the beginning of psychoanalysis, Freud reveals that he believes in the dominance of the pleasure principle, that is, that it would regulate all mental events in search of a pressure reduction, avoid unpleasantness or production of pleasure. However, it must be said that the author, in the course of his work, changes his theorizing, evidenced in his text *Beyond the pleasure principle*.

Under the influence of the ego's self-preservation instincts, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle. This does not abandon the intention of obtaining pleasure, but requires and postpones satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of obtaining it and the temporary tolerance to unpleasantness⁽¹¹⁾. The sexual instincts often manage to overcome the reality principle and arrive by indirect paths to a direct or substitutive satisfaction. This event, however, which would be an opportunity for pleasure in other cases, is felt by the ego as unpleasantness⁽¹¹⁾.

Thus, it can be seen, in this text, that Freud challenges the pleasure principle dominance, which leads him to abandon the dichotomy between ego instincts and sexual instincts, replacing it with the dichotomy between life drive and death drive. The latter is related to a retrograde character corresponding to a repetition compulsion, always seeking to restore the inanimate state, that is, a position where there was no tension and, therefore, unpleasantness: “If seeking to restore a previous state of affairs is a so universal characteristic of instincts, then there is no reason to be surprised with so many processes being held in mental life regardless of the pleasure principle. This characteristic would be shared by all the component instincts and, in its case, would aim to return once again to a specific stage of development⁽¹¹⁾.”

This particular stage to which the author refers is related to primary processes, such as primary narcissism, in which the pleasure principle operated. Thus, Freud reaches the end of his concept by saying that the pleasure principle actually seems to serve the death instincts.

Following this reasoning presented in Freud's theorizing, Lacan performs his contribution on the theme. Thus, by tracing a panorama of Lacan's path regarding drugs, his first allusion to the issue occurred in 1938 in *The family complexes in the formation of the individual*, in which he related drug addiction to the psychic trauma of weaning. Where he considered drug addiction a return, even partial, to the period in which the subject was fused to the paternal imago, that is, unconscious representation of the father and his function⁽¹²⁾.

Later, Lacan, in *Presentation on psychical causality*, supports the idea that the use of drug is searching for unity through an imaginary complement. In this, he points out to intoxication as an example that allows us to understand that in the beginning there is no a subject⁽¹³⁾. Thus, it is clear that to understand

the addiction phenomenon in Lacanian theory, it is inevitable to talk about the subject issue (Subject of the unconscious) and consequently about Oedipus, which, according to this, the constitution of subjectivity, that is, the symbolic dimension the subject, occurs through the passage through the Oedipus.

Thus, while Freud was trying to psychologically define the Oedipus complex, Lacan goes on to formulate a Oedipus theory as a structure that determines the psychological phenomena of the subject. That is, Lacan finds Oedipus as a “structuring structure”, external to the subjects and that determines them this way⁽¹⁴⁾. Oedipus is no longer seen as complex, but as law. Lacan draws up a reformulation of the narcissism theory and interprets the Oedipus complex as the *paternal metaphor*, a mechanism that is responsible for the inclusion of the subject in the symbolic order⁽¹⁴⁻¹⁵⁾.

This Oedipus, as the paternal metaphor, is thought around the paternal function, a concept that articulates with the concepts of phallus and castration complex, which is a symbolic representation of threat of disappearance to the extent that this does not concern the penis, a real object, but to the phallus, an imaginary object⁽¹⁵⁾. Thus, by evoking the symbolic the subject is divided, paving the way for something of desire, fantasy and unconscious. However, this causes a loss of unlimited jouissance, a characteristic of a period in which the still undifferentiated individual was cast to maternal imago. This leads the individual to live in a continuous relationship with a lack of satisfaction that allows the institution of the desire and only from it the subject emerges⁽¹⁾.

However, such a desire remains dissatisfied, leading the subject to feel an immense distress, always looking for something that can create the illusion of completeness. At that point of view, the intoxication resource may be serving as a solution to imaginatively complete this lack, turning the drug into the only absence claimed by the drug addict, which allows them to not confront the inconvenience of castration. “The relationships that each subject establishes with drugs are always unique ways of dealing with unpleasantness, with malaise, with castration, and ultimately with the subjective division”⁽¹⁾.

Thus, drug addiction is configured as a response to the suffering that would demand symbolization, but the subject responds through action, electing the jouissance that suppresses the absence and only accepts the jouissance that is obtained in the body.

Thus, Lacan uses his analytical finding on the subject's division to coordinate the use of toxic substances with his jouissance concept⁽¹⁾.

The term jouissance in Lacan's work appears from 1938 to the end. At first, it was confused with the term pleasure. Subsequently, it differed and became a central Lacanian concept⁽¹⁶⁾. Lacan reads the text *Malaise in civilization*, by Freud, to create opposition between jouissance and pleasure. For him, pleasure would be to avoid the pain and at this point, in the background, jouissance would appear. That is, he understands that the pleasure principle and the reality principle serve the principle of non-displeasure. However, there is something which forces this barrier and this is what constitutes the jouissance⁽¹⁶⁾. Thus, jouissance and pleasure no longer belong to the same register. Therefore, after Freud, Lacan presents his idea of how to operate the machinery of jouissance through language, saying that jouissance can be outlined by the discourse, which produces different emergency arrangements of it⁽¹⁷⁾.

One of these arrangements is the phallic jouissance, which is based on power relations, that is, in social relations. He has the phallus as the center of his organization and a permanent reference. It is a sexual jouissance, resulting from the translation of body jouissance by the significant, and therefore, being the jouissance of speech, outside the body. It is limited and subject to the threat of castration⁽¹⁸⁾.

However, this phallic jouissance is rejected by the drug addict, since they do not submit to the universalized jouissance of civilization. Marrying the drug would replace marriage with the phallic attribute, creating a new form of jouissance, which breaks with traditional, sexual or phallic, subordinating them to a jouissance of the Other, outside the symbolic, as it is of the order of the real and not about the phallus⁽¹⁾. Thus, the intoxication resource is a way found by the subject to not come across castration. That is, the subject suppresses themselves as the subject of desire⁽¹⁾.

In his reading *The place of psychoanalysis in medicine*, Lacan understands the toxic as science products. There, he presents his idea that scientific activity is a form of speech, that is, a way of knowing that assumes powers in the social bond plan. In this perspective, the drug addict resource to drugs is just an effect, among many, that science produces in the world⁽¹⁹⁾.

Behind this concept adopted by the author is the concept he described as gadgets, a term that

characterizes inventions forged by science, without use value, but with function to offer subjects means of a fictitious recovery of instinctive satisfaction. Thus, drug would be aiming to the recovery of this satisfaction and exerting effects on the body of individuals, which would make possible a relationship of *jouissance*⁽¹⁾.

These science fabrications, by offering the subject the means of a recovery from instinctive satisfaction, make the subject to connect to them, even getting connected and settled to them. And this is the real effect of science on the body. In the case of drugs, they begin to answer the issue of *jouissance* of the body, that is, science provides chemical operators capable of forming themselves into regulators of their own libidinal economy, whose sole purpose is to extract satisfaction⁽²⁰⁾. By referring to this drug characteristic, Lacan refers to the idea that the drive can be fulfilled with a harmful object to the individual, and thus the deep adherence of the drug addict to drug cannot be explained but from the point of view of *jouissance*, which leads to conceive it as a particular way of satisfaction⁽²⁰⁾.

In this way, although Freud and Lacan have not worked much on the drug theme, many current authors use to concepts that Freud and Lacan presented to understand the phenomenon of drug addiction in postmodernity.

Trainspotting: drug addiction as a postmodernity symptom

The film *Trainspotting*, a drama directed by Danny Boyle in 1996, brings through the odyssey experienced by the character Mark Renton in his attempt to quit heroin, a sincere reflection on the postmodern society and the values to which it remains connected. Thus, it is possible to make an approximation of the film with the psychoanalytic study of some authors about drug addiction, who understand it as a symptom resulting from the postmodernity transformation and its current socio-cultural aspects, as the optimal consumption.

The modern consumerism follows the logic of pleasure at any price that is disseminated by the media in contemporary society. In this logic, what attracts the consumer is not the real utility of the product, but the promise of happiness associated with it. By purchasing this product the subject would be free of absence, the emptiness of their existence. Thus, according to these authors, drugs would be an object of consumption,

able to provide quick and easy obtaining of pleasure, in a comparable way to gadgets(1-2).

This association of drugs with other consumer products is evident at the beginning of the film, in the scene where Renton and Spud are running from the police, as the narrator (Renton) lists several consumerist products and ideals dictated by society as ways of obtaining pleasure and, also, as a means to fit the social logic: "Choose life, choose a job, choose a career, choose a family, choose a big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, electrical tin openers, choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments, choose a starter home, choose your friends, choose leisurewear and matching luggage, choose a suit in a range of fabrics. [...] But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life. I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?"

This first line of the character goes beyond demonstrating the drug association with the consumerist ideal. It can illustrate the role that drug acquires in the instinctive economy of the drug addict. In the drug addiction phenomenon, the partnership between the subject and the drug is characterized by subjection of the first by the second, making the subject to lose access route to their desire. Thus, the substance assumes the character of an irreplaceable object, of absolute value, which has the ability to neutralize the effect of subjective division⁽¹⁾.

This drug ability can be evidenced in Renton's speech, when he is explaining his relationship with heroine at the beginning of the film: "People think it's all about misery and desperation and death and all which is not to be ignored. But what they forget is the pleasure of it. Otherwise we wouldn't do it. Another point, which can be seen through this speech is the idea brought by Freud, when the pursuit of pleasure obtained by drug use would represent a form of substitutive satisfaction, that is, a palliative measures against the malaise arising from society. Thus, the phenomenon of addiction arises as a response possible and compatible with the modern society, fundamentally narcissistic, that rules for obtaining pleasure, giving priority to self-sufficiency at the expense of social and political dimension⁽¹⁾.

In the case of the drug addict, there is a break with the culture; drugs come to fill the anguish that would arise from the meeting of the subject with the

Other's desire⁽²¹⁾. Escaping this anguish through drug use can be evidenced in the film when the characters decided to stop using drugs and began to experience some situations in their everyday lives that caused them discomfort and suffering, which lead them to use drugs again. Thus, it can be said that drugs have a "reliever" character, that is, have a supposed completeness effect.

Thus, it is observed that the drug addict is that one who refuses castration, remaining in the field of *jouissance* (Not phallic). He finds a sexuality replacement way, combining love and *jouissance* in one product, the drug. What is evident in the drug addiction phenomenon is the issue of fraying of social bonds of the subject, making their relations extremely precarious and fragile⁽²¹⁾. This issue of drug addiction appears clearly in the film, because almost all addict characters have their social circle reduced to their families, to the drug supplier and to the companions of use.

Drug addiction is like a body's own manipulation technique in order to extract *jouissance*. And it is a particular *jouissance*, regulated by the Other, and thus, not phallic. Thus, it aims to recover part of the *jouissance* originally lost from the inscription of the phallic function⁽¹⁾. That said, the drug addict refuses the phallic *jouissance*, opting for a deadly *jouissance*. This drug addict relationship to the drug is perceived in Renton's speech: "[...] human relationships and all the things that really don't matter when you've got a sincere and truthful junk habit".

The drug addict's *jouissance* is given inseparably from the body. It does not go through the Other's body, which makes it cynical, considering cynical the one that enjoys without the Other's body. That is, the drug addict is a person who rejects the phallic *jouissance*, which is based on human relations. He is the one who refuses to participate in these relationships, being disconnected to them⁽¹⁸⁾. According to the same author, the drug addict, by refusing phallic *jouissance*, would have a deadly *jouissance*, which would mean that the master signifier of that individual is death. Thus, the image of this *jouissance* is devoid of symbolic, that is, the drug addict breaks with social relations and "marries" the drug. This marriage represents the bonding with the absolute, with himself, and the Other ceases to exist for him⁽¹⁸⁾.

All these issues place drug addiction in the list of act pathologies, far from being a symptom. "When the

approach occurs out of castration, without fantasy, in the actual, there is deadly *jouissance*, because the sexual dimension was foreclosed. That is when the actual receives a non-sexual interpretation, such as death, that is out of significance. [...] With the recrudescence of drug addiction, we are witnessing the triumph of not metaphorized *jouissance*, the *jouissance* that is not governed by the significant, and that produces the subject individual, dependent and enslaved to this *jouissance* object"⁽¹⁸⁾. This subordination is very visible in the film, which shows how the characters are only able to live according to the use of the drug, even in the abstinence phases. Thus the subject, through the use of drug, starts to reject the Other and believes only in their own *jouissance*, often breaking with the social relations to remain with toxic.

There are two other scenes in the film that can exemplify this situation very clearly. The first refers to a child's death in the cradle for lack of care of its mother, who is a heroin user. This extreme strong scene makes it clear how, in drug addiction, there is a complete erasure of the other and of social relations, and the subject lives only to use drugs. The second scene, when Renton says *supposed friends*, referring to his friends with whom he consumes drugs, which shows the fragility of social bonds.

Another aspect of the film that can be related to the Lacanian concept about drugs is related to the issue of gadgets, that is, inventions forged by science with the purpose of offering subjects means of a fictitious recovery of instinctive satisfaction. In the film, heroin is the drug in evidence, which is a semi-synthetic drug. Therefore, it is a drug invented by science, which can be consumed as a way to obtain, supposedly, an instinctive satisfaction.

Because of this, it can be said that drug addiction also has a social cause, since drug use would be associated with the ideal of the consumer society. This ideal makes abundant supply of easy, fast and available pleasure. Thus, it promotes a subjectivity of individuals where gadgets would be in place of objects that cause desire, serving to stanch the absence of the subject.

Thus, in modernity, the objects to be pursued are fragile and change frequently. Satisfaction cannot be deposited in the future; it has to be consumed instantly. Individuals look for an immediate satisfaction justified by the logic 'jouissance now at any price'. This phenomenon is visible in drug users, who opt for these

in order to get a quick and easy satisfaction⁽²²⁾. This drug addiction relationship with the ideal consumption of modern society and its association with the scientific discourse productions is seen in the film, which shows how the drug is used by the characters as a substitute way to get pleasure, putting aside almost all other areas of their lives, such as work, family and love.

Thus, through the points discussed in this article was observed that, according to Freudian and Lacanian view of the drug addiction phenomenon, it is not seen as a symptom in the strict Freudian sense, for not being the same as the classic formations of the unconscious, which involve a return of the repressed and involve the symbolic aspect.

Thus, we conclude that the film *Trainspotting* portrays how drug addiction lies within the so-called act pathologies, that is, pathologies in which the psychic development gives way to action, involving subjects with an important narcissistic frailty. And this pathology is closely related to the social context of contemporary society, which has as a characteristic the self-centeredness and individualism. In this sense, drug addiction is characterized as a postmodern symptom, which serves to prevent pain and to escape from subjectivity.

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