

Metaddiction: Addiction at Work in Martin Amis' *Money*

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This paper aims to explore the complex manner in which Martin Amis defines the state of addiction—as the sustained collapse of objectivity and subjectivity for any inhabitant of a social system—as well as how the systemic patterns of life impose, imprint, and perpetuate themselves upon the individual.

Asked about the political and social impact of certain modern writers' treatment of drugs in their work, Jacques Derrida made an instructive admonition: "There is not a *single* world of drugs . . . To conflate such differences in a homogeneous series would be delirious, indeed narcotizing."¹ It is just this delirious and narcotizing conflation that Martin Amis captures in *Money* (1986). However, addiction as it exists in Amis' text has surprisingly little to do with actual drugs. Amis' protagonist and narrator John Self seldom mentions them, despite repeated confessions of addictions to everything from hamburgers to handjobs. Yet it is with this oversight (deliberate, to be sure) that Amis makes his point: the time in which society could dissociate itself from the problematic compulsive behavior characteristic of a shadowy and marginalized drug culture is over. The notion of drug culture and addiction has infiltrated the entire consumer system to the extent that it functions more as the fabric of the world in which individuals are ensconced than as a fringe phenomenon. Indeed, drugs and normal market forces in *Money* have fused, such that it is difficult to discern where one ends and the other begins. They share even a language, as Fielding Goodney glibly demonstrates: "Always endeavour, Slick, to keep a *fix* on the addiction industries: you can't lose. The addicts can't win . . . Nowadays the responsible businessman keeps a finger on the pulse of dependence."²

John Self characterizes all of modernity, at least as far back as he cares to recall, as a drug when he glosses over the *Morning Line* newspaper: "Here's another piece about that chick who's dying in her teens because, according to the *Line*, she's allergic to the twentieth century. Poor Kid . . . I'm not allergic to the twentieth century. I am addicted to the twentieth century."³ John's opposition of 'allergic' to 'addicted' in this passage highlights the dichotomous aspect of drugs—namely, that they may be viewed as both a legal antidote and illicit poison—that has attached itself to society.⁴ If we are to suppose that an allergic reaction connotes a response to medication, then

even the 'good' drugs—pharmaceuticals—are subsumed in the destructive realm of addiction. Furthermore, that the media, one of the most far-reaching and influential forces in contemporary society, represents her as a victim of the modern era exacerbates the problem. The *Morning Line* as media agent—not to mention narcotic agent, the name an allusion to cocaine—is as addictive and destructive as the very thing it condemns.

Yet, despite his maddened insistence on the placement of addiction in a modern context, Amis ultimately asserts that this system has been in place for time immemorial. Indeed, to be a part of any system is to suffer from a set of effects analogous to addiction. This paper, then, aims to explore the complex manner in which Amis defines the state of addiction—as the sustained collapse of objectivity and subjectivity for any inhabitant of a social system—as well as how the systemic patterns of life impose, imprint, and perpetuate themselves upon the individual.

A Momentary Turn of the Dial

In order to understand the system of addiction at work in Amis' text, we will turn briefly to a theme in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). A novel obsessed with death, *White Noise* chronicles a family of characters whose every action is motivated by a severe preoccupation with and angst in light of the consideration that they will in fact die. The appearance of Dylar—a mystery pill thought to hold an almost mystical power to ease the fear of dying—in *White Noise* underpins the idiosyncratic anxiety about death that Jack's wife Babette feels. Yet its failure to mollify her fear after repeated use reveals the key to understanding the nature of the system at work in *White Noise*, and in turn, that of *Money*.

Because Dylar metaphorically and literally *encapsulates* the addictive and consumptive phenomenon prevalent in *White Noise*, Jack and Babette are incapable of understanding its specific functions and properties. This misapprehension may be seen as a symptom of their overwhelming fear of death. As fear of death in an organism presupposes an inward looking entity, and thus regards the organic, discrete nature of itself (that which exists within the physical body), Jack and Babette cannot use Dylar with any success because they are wed to the traditional biological theory that concerns itself with organic chemistry. In order for a fear of death to exist at all, there must exist a discrete and reflective interior that is the result of unique neurochemical processes within the brain. Dylar, though, functions

on the premise of physics; it is “a drug-delivery system,”⁵ having more to do with transmission than chemical reaction. Much like the world of waves and radiation with which Jack expresses fascination, Dylar seems to have only physical properties, and, as the neurochemist Winnie Richards assures, “no medicine, obviously.”⁶

Money, and the Realm of Physics

The discussion of *Money* as a systems novel begins with Winnie Richards’ description of Dylar: “It self-destructs. It implodes minutely of its own massive gravitation. We’ve entered the realm of physics. Once the plastic membrane is reduced to microscopic particles, it passes harmlessly out of the body in the time-honored way.”⁷ As a scientist who works at the border between chemistry and physics, Winnie’s explication of Dylar articulates the quiver between its global effects in the body’s physiology and its own local physical properties. Her account of Dylar’s excretion brings this dichotomy into focus. The second part of the sentence—“it passes . . .”—seems almost an afterthought, provided to quell Jack’s need to know the final orientation of Dylar’s disparate parts with respect to his discrete physique. Where Dylar is actually relevant, though, is not at the larger level of urethras and esophagi—parts that relate to the body’s metabolic processes—but rather in the realm where quantum particle interactions have effects. In this realm, an understanding of the self as a discrete body or mind with individual identity is essentially fallacious. Ideas of interiority or exteriority, of internal chemistry, are derivatives of the process of human observation. They are abstract representations of the world, manufactured to make the world sensible to the human mind, rather than accurate reflections of the world’s real properties and states. The atoms and electrons that compose the surface of the epidermis are essentially indistinguishable in character from those that compose the air just above. In this way, the process by which Dylar acts introduces an understanding of human actions as phenomena that emerge from complex systems of interacting ‘particles.’ Human actions are not catalyzed by original intention or cogitation; rather, every intention or cogitation that seems the result of personal freedom is in actuality simply the effect of some wave of particulate interactions that has been propagating through space long before it reaches the individual.

DeLillo certainly means to introduce this aspect of the postmodern world. And at some level, Jack even approaches a partial understanding of it

when he calls Dylar “Technology with a human face.”⁸ This phrase, almost a slogan in Gladney’s bemused tenor, means to refer to the system Dylar instantiates: a body that behaves according to a larger system, replete with its own objective set of processes and laws, dissembling as an individual consciousness anchored by the ability to exercise choice and free will. Dylar’s existence, then, throttles the very balance between subjectivity and objectivity assumed to exist in every human being. Indeed, it is the phenomenological perversion of this balance, the scandalization of the Enlightenment model of the individual to such an extent that every member of this system, voluntary or otherwise, cannot even retreat into the self as a refuge from the relentless imposition of society.

Ultimately, DeLillo backs away from a strict adherence to this systemic conception. Such concerns remain dormant in *White Noise*, for while its characters occasionally stumble upon the meaninglessness of their systemically dictated actions and motivations, they remain essentially people with actual fears, fears which, in their simplest implications, validate a discrete sense of self. Babette, a virtual guru of the phenomenon of fear, leads Jack to reason that “fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level.”⁹ An entity without fear is a body without self.

The ‘Self’ in Money

And so Martin Amis, not without a generous helping of irony, names his protagonist John Self, the character who is born into the novel already corroded by the system. Indeed, Self’s world, the world of *Money*, is nothing less than the continuation of the systemic properties and tendencies adumbrated by DeLillo in *White Noise*. Whereas DeLillo’s characters ultimately retain a hidden mystery, albeit mangled by the societal forces at work in the novel, John Self is left open to bear the full brunt of Amis’—the system’s author—sadistic impulses. That Amis primarily characterizes Self by his lack of motivation indicates the vacuity in place of where Self’s will should be; John’s very subjectivity here is authorially negated. Furthermore, John’s dismissal of death, which he mindfully notes in his diary—“An iconoclast, I had no time for mortality”¹⁰—ultimately betrays his recognition of particulate status. Because consideration of death functions as the most common denominator of any discrete thinking, it is the notion that most affirms one’s individuality and freedom of being.

In constructing this systems novel, Amis employs John in order to

individuate the systemic process at work in contemporary society. John Self is the subject, literally a prototypical 'self' that undergoes a series of events, the material picture of which determines his fate. Self, however, is largely ignorant of his status as the author's machine, particularly at the novel's outset. This inchoate awareness of being imprisoned in the novel's system is what allows him to give himself over wholly to the pursuit of pleasures that this society offers—to assert what he may erroneously think is his individual subjectivity.

What is ironic about the lack of a discrete self that is implied by John's lack of fear, however, is that John is indeed afraid of one thing: "When it comes to fighting, I'm brave . . . But fear really scares me. He's too good at fighting and I'm too frightened anyway."¹¹ Self's fear of fear is recursive: that he dismisses the phenomenon of fear in terms of his physical safety shows John to accept his particulate identity heedlessly, but John's acknowledgement of his fear of fear seems to betray an unconscious aversion to his incipient self-awareness as both a fictional character and a controlled automaton. Like Babette in *White Noise*, John seems to perceive that fear implies a developmental self-awareness. But in Self's world, this self-awareness is inconsistent with the guiltless patterns of vice and consumption in which people take part. It is as if at this point in the novel he were reluctant to entertain the notion of himself as a figure controlled by an unseen hand. And although John leaks to the reader a premonition about the source of his fear—he refers to the abstract concept as "he"—he is both unable and unwilling to follow the suspicion to its extraordinary conclusion.

Self's repressed insights are perceptive. As the individuation of the systemic process at work, John necessarily finds himself the subject of a conspiracy to homogenize his status as a fictional consciousness and narrator. Amis, as the creator of John, obviously recognizes John's unique status: John is at once a discrete individual and a mere body fattened by consumption. It is this queer binary that allows Amis to conspire against him and necessitates that he does. Self's father within the novel fictionally manifests this conspiracy inasmuch as he hires a contract out on John. Amis' systematization of John by definition creates and whets an authorial appetite to scheme against him, since Amis' praxis of plotting substantiates the novel's incorporation of systems theory. The textual Martin Amis—the author within the book—affirms this praxis when he tells John that the ability to do anything he likes with a character "creates an appetite for punishment. The author is not free of sadistic impulses."¹²

Additionally, Amis' inclusion of a character named Horris Tolchock further cements the sense of conspiracy against John. An allusion to the vernacular of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), 'tolchock' may be defined as the violent striking of another, a definition that resonates with Horris' profession as 'hitman.' Tolchock serves his purpose by literally striking John in the novel, but his presence has yet another, intertextual function. *Money* and *A Clockwork Orange* share a mechanism in depicting the predominant structure of power's homogenization of the individual to the extent that, his creative juices squeezed, he becomes a programmable machine. The crucial difference between the novels in terms of this homogenization is that while Burgess intends to indict political structures that seek to appropriate the individual's freedoms and bowdlerize his artistic impulses, the 'money' system insidiously absorbs all individual freedoms and impulses without threat of physical force. Amis charts a society in which the battle is already won because there exists no alternative but to conform to the values prescribed by that impersonal system. The characters in *Money* are thus will-less automata that blindly seek to advance themselves in society according to their preset roles.

Cellular Automata, the Metaphor of Money, and the Implications for Addiction

The notion of Amis' characters as independently functioning robots working together in a system resonates especially well with modern science's development of cellular automata. In the same way that Dylar comes to encapsulate the society of DeLillo's *White Noise*, cellular automata—quasi-organisms encapsulated by bits in computers—epitomize the society of *Money*. Cellular automata were the product of a popular school of thinking in the scientific community that considered programmable computers as extremely general behavior generators with no intrinsic behavior of their own. This precept implies that with the installation of a program that stipulates the behavior of specific systems in life, we may make observations about the behavior of systems in actual biological environments. Furthermore, by comparing the behavior of these different biological environments with the actual initial conditions on earth, we may extrapolate universal laws of life that are not confined to a carbon-based, earth-biased environment.

The upshot of this line of thought is revolutionary in scope. It suggests that life is not simply a set of metabolic processes, but rather, forms of

interaction between self-organized units of matter. Essentially, life is defined as processes of self-organization; therefore, as Claus Emmeche writes, “in a logical sense, life [would henceforth have to] be considered to be a fundamentally vague concept reflecting a genuine vagueness, a continuum [of organization] in nature.”¹³

Tested on a computer program written by John Horton Conway, cellular automata illustrated that life displays a pervasively definitive property: the cellular automata ‘living’ in the program adopted optimized strategies for propagating themselves, and those strategies were largely a function of the initial patterns in which they were arranged. This observation led the scientists to conclude that living systems act based on the singular purpose of perpetuating themselves, a conclusion that implies that all living organisms behave as automata striving to preserve their own genetic pattern. They will change their behavior only if those changes guarantee a form of self-propagation.

Nothing in Amis suggests an interest in actual biological theory, yet the society he depicts in *Money* bears a striking similarity to this scientific phenomenon. Indeed, it is as if Amis had applied this very mode of thought when specifying the principles by which his characters interact. And certainly, we might conclude that it would not be lost on him that this application of theory to his work is possible because life’s processes are not environmentally restricted; on the contrary, they may exist anywhere, a novel’s pages being no exception.

Amis’ characters, then, are automata of his own devising, hungrily perpetuating an ascendant pattern of consumption and reproduction. Necessarily ascertained as a whole,¹⁴ this collective is the most recent incarnation of a program-like system that has been evolving since life’s beginning. By the novel’s end, John Self ultimately recognizes and thus validates this systemic form: “*Do you want to know the meaning of life? Life is an aggregate, an aggregate of all the lives that have ever been lived on the planet Earth. That’s the meaning of life.*”¹⁵

It is at this point that addiction may be logically understood as it appears in *Money*. Note Self’s lucid insight into life in his world:

Maybe money is the great conspiracy, the great fiction. The great addiction: we’re all addicted and we can’t break the habit now. There’s not even anything very twentieth century about it, except the disposition.¹⁶

Self's realization that there is really nothing new about the process of life reflects his understanding of the system into which he is thrown, a system like that of the automata: society as simulacrum. Self also discerns, rather insightfully, that addiction as a state of being is as old as life itself. In his conception of the world, John apprehends that to live is simultaneously to will one's self and to be willed to subscribe to the behaviors that perpetuate the whole. And insofar as the consumption of goods, which bolsters the individual, and the pursuit of sex directly affect self-perpetuation, they become the goals to which the aggregate devotes itself.

This blind, objectified devotion constitutes addiction in *Money*—subjects deprived of their subjectivity. And to the extent that money is the common denominator by which Amis' characters attain these goals, they in turn become addicted to money itself. In Amis' text money functions as a drug; as the literal currency of society, it comes into contact with every body on a material level, and also functions as the metaphor for the system of transactions that occurs in society and that that society has become. Perhaps the only reference to 'junk'—an all-inclusive term for opiates, which are some of the most addictive controlled substances known to man—in the novel outside of John's bloodlust for junk food occurs in describing the unremitting ubiquity of money: "You just can't kick it, that junk, even if you want to. You can't get the money monkey off your back."¹⁷

Money objectifies and consumes indiscriminately. Self marvels at the disinterest with which it treats its constituents: "Oh, money . . . You're so democratic: you've got no favourites. You even things out for me and my kind."¹⁸ This disinterest is in keeping with the systemic nature of society that Amis creates. Money, despite what meanings and uses Self assigns to it, has no teleological purpose except to perpetuate itself. Indeed, it possesses a kind of consciousness of its own, a notion Self validates by addressing it directly. In this manner, it conspires, along with Amis, against those who use it in the hopes of sustaining subjectivity: "Jesus, it's an outrage. It's a scandal . . . you just cannot beat the money conspiracy. You can only join it."¹⁹ Note here that the nature of money's conspiracy is in misleading people into believing that it can be put to use to attain an end that they desire when its use signifies an end in itself. Like a drug in this way, it fosters dependence on itself and consequently subsumes all entreaties to use. In the grips of such an addiction, Amis' characters assume a passivity and, objectified, find themselves in servitude to addiction.

Reality, Performance, and Transmission in Spunk

Perhaps the most significant ‘development’ in *Money* is the metamorphic corruption of the messianically pure Spunk Davis. Initially defiant, Spunk’s eventual embrace of the money system concretizes the objective laws of reality set forth in the novel, namely, that the system in which all characters live exists in perpetuity, merely using its inhabitants to propagate itself.

Spunk’s transformation signals more, though. As the actor hired to play a role “loosely based on” John,²⁰ Spunk artistically represents Self’s authorial and directorial creation. To the extent, then, that Spunk fulfills, even becomes, this role, Spunk not only guarantees the system’s continuation, but also establishes an emergent pattern in the system’s reproductive behavior. As Amis, the system’s author, projects the societal conditions he creates onto Self, Self, the embedded and vitiated subject, projects his own condition of living onto Spunk, his metafictional offspring. Davis’ very name—‘Spunk’ is British slang for semen—suggests that he is the product of Self’s conception and the carrier of his genetic code. We may thus ascertain that the system at play in *Money* executes its self-prolongation on the level of individual genetic transmission.

In this respect, the system’s behavior is built on the Freudian and Marcusean concept of the reality principle. Marcuse describes this principle in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) as the ontogenetic result of the traumatic realization that, steeped in an objective reality that severely limits the unrestricted pursuit of pleasure, the individual comes to renounce and restrain himself in order to perform actions that will ensure his survival. For Marcuse and Freud, this principle applies both to the history of humanity and to the individual, and it occurs in the early youth of each:

During the period of early childhood . . . The rule of the primal father is followed, after the first rebellion, by the rule of the sons, and the brother clan develops into institutionalized social and political domination. The reality principle materializes in a system of institutions. And the individual growing up within such a system, learns the requirements of the reality principle as those of law and order, and transmits them to the next generation.²¹

If the above determination on the historical and psychological origin of naturally occurring living systems is correct, then it functions to ground

Amis' world as similar to our own in that both fundamentally owe their organization and socialization to a kind of patriarchy.

Marcuse becomes especially poignant, though, when he extends Freud's theory to what he terms the "Performance principle: the prevailing historical form of the reality principle."²² This notion resonates well with Spunk Davis' purpose in the novel. As John's cinematic analog, Spunk's initial reluctance and eventual alacrity to 'perform' his role in the film allegorizes the Marcusean conception of an individual who moves from the pleasure principle to the performance principle to merge successfully with society by repressing individual instincts. His subjectivity thus hijacked, Spunk masters the part of D(r)oug to such an extent that the fiction of the film seems to intrude upon the reality of Spunk's life. He exists now as his character, a drug user, a fornicator, a drinker, a consumer, simultaneously a trophy and a casualty of the system.

The Withdrawal of Self

It is no accident that John Self becomes aware of his identity as fictional consciousness—the great metafictional conspiracy—only when he is bankrupt and cast out by a portion of society he habitually kept. It would seem that by the novel's end the system has finished with John, regarding him all but used up. Yet it is in these final pages of *Money*, where Self undergoes a figurative and literary withdrawal, that we are able to ascertain and affirm the warning that John Self embodies. To be imprisoned in the system, to live in the service of addiction, to forego one's subjectivity, is all to be inhuman. John seems to think as much when he honors humans with some of his last words.²³ These words, inscribed in his journal onto the end of Amis' text proper, insist on a final, defeated message in the memorial of John's woe.

Notes

¹ Derrida, Jacques, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, et al, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 237.

² Amis, Martin, *Money: A Suicide Note*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 91 my emphasis.

³ Ibid. p. 89.

⁴ Derrida, p. 235. Derrida conceptualizes this idea with the term *pharmakon*.

⁵ DeLillo, Don, *White Noise*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 187.

⁶ Ibid. p. 230.

⁷ Ibid. p. 188.

⁸ Ibid. p. 211.

⁹ Ibid. p. 229.

¹⁰ Amis, p. 361.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 10.

¹² Ibid. p. 229.

¹³ Emmeche, Claus, *The Garden in the Machine*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 24.

¹⁴ Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the first major systems theorist, states that “because living systems are dynamic processes that combine energy and information in reciprocal relations, the systems are not separable into parts but must be considered as wholes.” LeClair, Tom, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 4.

¹⁵ Amis, p. 361.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 354.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 354.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 267.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 221.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 121.

²¹ Marcuse, Herbert, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 15.

²² Ibid. p. 35.

²³ Amis, p. 363. “*Humans, I honour you.*”

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