

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

2017

Addiction

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, gerard.canavan@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Canavan, Gerry, "Addiction" (2017). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 387.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/387

Addiction

Gerry Canavan

A July 16, 2010, segment on *The Daily Show*, three months after the catastrophic Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, offers an amusing supercut of every president since 1970 promising to eliminate US oil dependence. Barack Obama in 2010 announces that “now is the moment” to “seize control of our own destiny” back from the oil on which we depend; George W. Bush in 2006 promises to “make our dependence on Middle Eastern oil a thing of the past”; his father in 1992 asserts “there is no security for the United States in further dependence on foreign oil”; and so on, all the way back to Richard Nixon, who swore that by 1980 “the United States will not be dependent on any other country for the energy we need” (Stewart 2010).

The repeated word *dependence* suggests an intriguing medicalization of the material conditions of oil capitalism. The fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), which offers standard definitions of psychological disorders and pathologies for use by clinicians and psychiatrists, defines “substance dependence” as “a maladaptive pattern of substance use, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress” (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 197). From the beginning of the petroleum age, literary works have associated oil prosperity with precisely this risk of ecstatic, drunken excess; in the delirium of abundance made possible by oil there is always the possibility that one might consume too much. Among other alcoholics in his 1927 novel *Oil!*, Upton Sinclair describes “Old Chief Leatherneck, of the Shawnees,” whose oil money has purchased him “a different colored automobile for each day of the week, and he figures to

get drunk three times every day” (Sinclair 1927, 323). James Dean’s Jett from George Stevens’s *Giant* (1956)—much like his 2007 counterpart Daniel Plainview from Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*—moves quickly from oil entrepreneur to oil casualty, ending the film an embarrassing wreck, drunk and disgraced at a party he has thrown to honor himself. Even the perception-altering “spice” that makes interstellar navigation possible in Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965)—found only on the desert planet of Arrakis, which is populated by religious fundamentalists who ultimately unleash an intergalactic “jihad”—carries with it the risk of a hallucinogenic “spice trance,” an overdose.

The commonplace metaphorical connection between petroleum and alcohol reimagines oil capitalism itself as a kind of abiding, society-wide moral weakness, particularly insofar as our collective level of “dependence” has continued to degenerate over decades without any material progress toward a solution. Now, as each year brings oil that is both harder to find and harder to extract than what had been available before, each year necessarily brings us closer to the end of this century-long civilizational bender. And the only thing that will be worse than our current orgiastic excess, the thinking suggests, will be the hangover we face the morning after the oil finally runs out. “Dear future generations,” writes Kurt Vonnegut in a late work to the people of a future world devastated by resource scarcity and climate change, “Please accept our apologies. We were roaring drunk on petroleum” (quoted in Blais 2007).

The DSM-IV offers up several familiar criteria to define this maladaptive pattern of substance dependence that are easily applied to oil capitalism. There is *tolerance*, the need for ever-growing amounts of the substance in order to achieve the same effect, namely the smooth functioning of the economy; and of course there is *withdrawal*, the emergence of physical symptoms—in oil’s case, catastrophic economic downturns—when insufficient amounts of substance are procured. And on we go, through each of the seven criteria:

3. The substance is often taken in larger amounts or over a longer period than intended.
4. There is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use.
5. A great deal of time is spent in activities necessary to obtain the substance, use the substance, or recover from its effects
6. Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of substance use.

Most crucial of all, perhaps, is number 7: “The substance use is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by the substance” (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 197). Even knowing full well that the carbon release from fossil fuels is aggressively destabilizing the climate—even after all the smog, all the spills, all the recessions, all the wars—even though the oil is bound to run out anyway, whether or not we choose to adapt in time—the only thing we can think to do is drill harder.

“Dependence,” then, seems like an unusually perspicacious euphemism for describing the relationship of technological modernity to oil. But the revised and updated DSM-V,

released in May 2013, suggests that even the category “dependence” does not go quite far enough. In the DSM-V, the language around substance abuse has been altered significantly; the word “dependence” is abandoned in favor of a return to the once-eschewed language of “addiction.” Charles O’Brien, who headed the American Psychiatric Association’s Substance-Related Disorders Work Group for the DSM-V, explained the change at the 21st Annual Meeting of the APA in December 2010 (Fox 2010). The DSM-IV category of “substance abuse and dependence” had unhappily blurred the distinction between functional and dysfunctional relationships with drugs; a person prescribed antidepressants (for instance) may develop many of the markers of substance dependence, such as tolerance and withdrawal, but this relationship is not necessarily pathological. “The term dependence is misleading, because people confuse it with addiction, when in fact the tolerance and withdrawal patients experience are very normal responses to prescribed medications that affect the central nervous system,” summarizes O’Brien in a later press release. “On the other hand, addiction is compulsive drug-seeking behavior”—uncontrolled, erratic, destructive, even suicidal self-harm in the name of procuring more of the drug at any cost (Curley 2010). “The adaptations associated with drug withdrawal,” O’Brien writes with Nora Volkow and T. K. Li in 2006 in support of this revision, “are distinct from the adaptations that result in addiction, which refers to the loss of control over the intense urges to take the drug even at the expense of adverse consequences” (O’Brien et al. 2006, 764–65).

In the surreal, years-later coda of 2007’s *There Will Be Blood*, a miniature history of the oil age, we find a metaphorical vision of the inevitable endpoint of this addictive downward spiral. The film’s oilman protagonist, Daniel Plainview, is rediscovered living in decadent opulence in Hollywood in a mansion complete with a private bowling alley. He is roused from an alcoholic blackout by his nemesis, the young preacher Eli, with a terrible shout: “Wake up, Daniel Plainview! The house is on fire!” Some crisis is at hand, but Plainview cannot be moved. Ruminating sullenly on the death of God, having already exhausted through slant drilling the very oil field Eli has come to sell him, Daniel soon erupts into a sudden paroxysm of violence, ultimately beating Eli to death with a bowling pin before collapsing in defeat and shrugging, “I’m finished.” Cut to black. This is one dream of how the oil age ends. No future, no hope, no possible alternatives; we are just finished.

In the DSM-V’s terms, then, American presidents should clearly have spoken explicitly of addiction rather than dependence. The wars in the MIDDLE EAST, the obsessive exploitation of tar sands and dangerous deep-sea deposits, hydrofracking in the suburbs, ongoing government handouts to fossil fuel companies, the continued refusal to invest in clean energy and GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE in any serious way, the absolute denialist refusal to even discuss the transition to post-carbon economics at any point during the endless 2012 presidential campaign—this is compulsive drug-seeking behavior, this is addiction. And in this logic, perhaps, the “long emergency” of peak oil—imminent, if not already here—becomes the dreaded but longed-for moment called “hitting rock bottom”: the inevitable, epiphanic final crash, which simultaneously offers up to the addict his only two possible futures: death in the gutter or healing and redemption, but only after you have admitted you have a problem.

See also: FICTION, LIMITS, PETROREALISM.