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Incomplete Objects and Unfulfilled Desire: Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream*

Abstract

Sara Goldfarb and her son Harry, two central characters in Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream*, are both addicts. The objects of their desire, a television set and a bag of drugs, are of particular significance because they cannot be enjoyed without a transmitter – an antenna and a syringe. The article presents these objects as incomplete and the desire attached to them as misplaced. What the characters are really looking for is something beyond, "a pound of pure" happiness. The world in *Requiem for a Dream* is purely physical, so only what is done to the body can be felt and understood by the characters. In the end, Sara and Harry both become incomplete like the objects they are pursuing.

Keywords: Hubert Selby Jr., transgressive fiction, desire, the body

1. (Incomplete) Objects and Desire

Sara and Harry Goldfarb, two central characters in Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream,* barring short spells of actual joy, feel empty and unfulfilled. Both lower-class and members of consumer society, they are only able to understand the physical world. Everything abstract must be connected to an object in order to be understood. Their use of objects in order to define themselves, apart from being a typical capitalist notion, is actually a manifestation of the longing for completeness – the point that I intend to prove in this article. Unlike notions, commodities are associated with stability and firmness. What the characters fail to see is that the objects of their wanting are flawed, lacking, and it is this lack that exacerbates their oppression. Their longing for objects leads to an unsatisfactory experience, which in turn constitutes a whole community of unsatisfied individuals who have misplaced their hopes and dreams. Harry's junkie friends and Sara's neighbors form bonds around objects, as their conversations are mostly about drugs or TV commercials and shows. Even though they seem natural and strong, these relationships break once the objects disappear.

Harry's and Sara's dissatisfaction brings to mind Jacques Lacan's idea that: "man's desire is the Other's desire" (2006, 525). Lacan's thought is organized around the concept of otherness. The distinction between the little and the big Other is essential here, as little others are all of our fellow citizens, whereas the big Other is a language, a set of rules, an order represented by multiple little others. This group includes the mother, the first other. Desire is something that happens to an individual, it comes from the outside. It is formed in relation to the first (little) others, as "the child needs objects which, even if it is not able to attain them itself, can be obtained through others" (Grosz 60). It is unarticulated, produced by repression, a certain lack in the subject. Colette Soler characterizes this lack as a "lacking in being" which forces the subject's search for meaning (50). She writes that "to have some feeling of being is to be loved or, more precisely, to be desired; to think that there is someone who can't live without you or misses you. In that case you have a feeling of being" (51). The subject's desire is therefore to be the object of the other's desire.

Sara and Harry cannot see that they treat the other's desire as their own. As explained by Slavoj Žižek, "the fundamental impasse of human desire is that it is the other's desire in both subjective and objective genitive: desire for the other, desire to be desired by the other, and, especially, desire for what the other desires" (36). What is desired by the characters "is predetermined by the big Other, the symbolic space within which [they] dwell" (Žižek 42). Their desire is constructed by their community, therefore the objects that Sara and Harry think they desire are actually not the *true* objects of their desire. Their real needs stay hidden, unreachable, which is why they devote so much attention to the television set and the pound of pure heroin – those are the objects that they (and their community) may understand. It is through obtaining these objects that Sara and Harry can actually gain admiration of their immediate environment.

A television set and a pound of heroin are both "incomplete objects," as on their own they are worthless. The former is just a transmitter, the latter is in need of one, but to their users they are of utmost importance, as they seem to make them "whole" (Selby 172). In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Jacques Lacan makes a clear distinction between the object and the Thing. The former is what it is, a physical object with no emotional connotations, no value, etc. The latter is achieved when the former is raised to that level of "dignity" through sublimation (1992, 138). The main quality of the Thing, this initially Freudian concept (*das Ding*), is that it signifies a certain lack within the subject, something that is lost, which the subject strives to regain by the sublimation of objects. The Thing has to be identified with "the orientation of the human subject to the object" (1992, 70), an object, as Lacan points out, that has never been lost in the first place.

However, an incomplete object can also be elevated through sublimation. Incompleteness situates the object in a sort of desire purgatory, as it does not signify disappointment, nor does it signify fulfillment, at least not without another

object to complete it and make it available for consumption. An incomplete object is also not a part-object (*objet partiel*) with its metonymic qualities. Here the subject refers to a part of an object, not the whole, whereas an incomplete object exists on its own but cannot be enjoyed without another object.

2. Addictions and Obsessions

At the beginning of the novel, Harry Goldfarb leaves his mother's apartment towing away her television set and heads to the pawn shop with his friend, Tyrone. Harry's mother, Sara, locks herself in the closet, as she does not want to witness this recurring spectacle. The theft of the television set has become a ritual of sorts, which Harry performs whenever he is in need of money to buy drugs. He could just ask his mother for cash – without revealing what he is going to spend it on – but the situation is crucial for the presentation of the world of the novel, which is that of commodities.

When her son leaves, the woman comforts herself with the thought that her time without the television set will be just a commercial break, a pause in the transmission and "till all work out" (Selby 2). But when she sits in front of the set, the advertisements or "interruptions," as Raymond Williams (93) refers to them, are for her an extension of the shows she is watching. Williams questions the quality prepared of programs in adjustment to these particular interruptions and notices that it takes some time to adapt to such insertions, as they alter the whole experience of watching a movie or a show (92). For Sara Goldfarb the flow of the broadcast is never broken up, she simply ignores the shifts, treating shows, movies and commercials as one seamless program. This continuity reveals its absurd nature later on, when Sara is on the verge of insanity and each time she tries to change a channel the program remains the same, "every channel, again and again, the picture the same" (Selby 134). She is no longer able to control the television set, and the host and the audience of a game show invade her living room. She is desperately in need of a pause in the transmission but it is too late – she is unable to escape which the illusion she routinely and voluntarily revisited.

In a sense, her insanity is caused by the painful realization of desire, is reminiscent of the expression "be careful what you wish for." She wants so desperately to be on television, to become a part of the show, yet when the people from the television set enter her living room and turn her life into an unwanted, constant reality show (albeit with no cameras rolling), she cannot stand this intrusion of the Real. The Real appears here in the Lacanian understanding of the term, standing for the finitude of the human experience. The three orders: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real are most visible in this scene, as the television set (the Symbolic) and the programming which demands Sara's constant attention (the Imaginary) are ridiculed by the farcical intrusion of something that

was supposed to stay detached, hidden (the Real). Antonio Quinet writes that for Lacan "the visible world of our perceptions is a world of images. In addition to the world of vision, there is the realm of the invisible that is the register of the gaze. The former is an imaginary perceptual order, the latter is real. In one we have images, in the other drives" (140). When finally able to encounter, to truly *see* her desires, Sara learns how dangerous they actually are.

In the beginning, while she is still sane, and with the television set retrieved from the pawn shop, Sara is relieved. After turning it on she is so enraptured by what she sees on the screen that she finds joy in fictional situations happening to fictional characters – for example when a wife serves her husband a typical TV dinner in a commercial and they both smile enjoying their meal (Selby 9). For Sara the set is more important than food, as she has to forfeit a couple of meals to buy it back. It is evident that food is not the object of her desire but when enjoyed by someone – an other – on the screen, a meal becomes desirable. When the television set is on, Sara is hypnotized and incessantly follows what is happening on the screen. Whether she is eating, reading or dying her hair, the television set must be on and she must be in a position that allows her to watch it.

Jonathan Crary observes that "moments after turning on a television set, there is no detectable rush or charge of sensation of any kind. Rather there is a slow shift into a vacancy from which one finds it difficult to disengage" (87). If we treat watching television as an experience, it is an incomplete one, as it does not bring the release it promises – it is not a successful escape from reality because when the set is turned off one finds oneself back in the same situation that they wanted to flee from – understood here as loneliness. Sara rarely turns off the television set, as watching it is the easiest way to stop herself from thinking (Henning and Vorderer). Media theorists point out that television viewers tend to look for more than a temporary release. Ron Lembo writes that "when people identify plausible programming, they are, in effect, saying that they know that the world of television is essentially a fictional one, and yet they are making the choice to become mindfully involved with its imagery in a way that is not simply oriented around escaping thoughts of their own real-life circumstances" (169).

Inaction does not bother Sara, because what she looks for is vacancy. She is also obsessed with the timeless reality of television programs. She still talks to her husband even though he is dead, and insists on treating her adult, drug-addicted son like an innocent child, thinking of the three of them as a perfect family. She finds the American Dream very appealing, but she is more interested in perseverance, making her most precious moments last as long as possible. That the broadcast seems to allow for such perennial happiness is why she finds it so engaging and this is the reason why she associates happiness with the television set.

Her son's obsession is more serious, as Harry is a heroin addict. For him the "interruptions" are more painful, because he experiences the physical symptoms of withdrawal. Harry and Tyrone dream about buying "a pound of pure" (Selby

130), which pertains to the quality and quantity of heroin that would allow them to inject it at will, never worrying about obtaining their next fix. As both men rely on outside sources to supply them with the drug, they do not have any influence over what they buy. What they get is usually not high-grade heroin. With their own "stash," they would be able to decide how potent they want their injected dose to actually be. Tom Carnwath and Ian Smith call achieving pure heroin "a complex process" (23), but reaching satisfaction with "a pound of pure" is practically impossible. When Harry and Tyrone get the best product available, they encounter an obvious issue that eventually leads to their disappointment with the object of their desire – with constant sale and usage, the stash becomes smaller and smaller, until it almost disappears.

3. Objects as Substitutes

Following Douglas and Isherwood's observation that "it is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators" (38), the question is: what do the television set and the bag of drugs actually communicate about the characters? In both cases the primary message is loneliness. Sara lives alone in her apartment and the television set is her only source of entertainment. She is on good terms with her neighbors, but does not go out, at least at first, as she prefers the timeless reality of the TV broadcast. It is only the call from the television company that "makes tomorrow alright" (Selby 117), and allows Sara to go out and spend some time with other elderly ladies who live in her building.

Referring to the 2000 movie adaptation of the novel, M. Keith Booker characterizes Harry's story as an acute critique of capitalism as "Harry and Tyrone become drug dealers and meet with considerable initial success. Cash piles up in a shoebox in their closet. Living the capitalist dream, they begin to make plans for a grand future. But capitalist competition has its downside as well, just as capitalist economies tend to have highs and lows" (43). Marion, his girlfriend, who is initially in love with Harry, eventually chooses heroin. Even though they make plans together about opening a chain of cafes, once heroin becomes harder and harder to obtain, as soon as Harry goes on a long interstate trip to buy heroin for them both, she leaves her home and has sex to get some more but this time just for herself. Once he is gone she is glad that "there's more where that came from, and no one to share it with" (Selby 222).

Carwath and Smith discuss a study (75–76) in which rats were given morphine until they developed a habit. Half of the rats were placed alone in cages and half were kept in colonies. Those that became members of a community were less likely to continue their addiction, even though they suffered the physical symptoms of withdrawal. The authors' conclusion is that "even more so than rats, one would

expect humans to make use of social networks and occupational involvement to overcome the drive of pharmacology" (76). The problem with Harry's circle of friends is that they are all drug addicts, driven by the desire to literally get high by consumption. His decision to get clean would mean cutting ties with them – this is the option taken by Tyrone's girlfriend, who leaves the city in order to deal with her addiction.

Harry's reluctance to leave his friends to get clean can be explained through the desire of the other. Harry does not know how to function outside the culture of commodities he grew up in, therefore he does not know what to desire. The dream of having their own cafe with Marion is just that, a dream, as they do not do anything to make it come true. This is the other side of "the desire of the other," as explained by Slavoj Žižek: "not only does the other address me with an enigmatic desire, it also confronts me with the fact that I myself do not know what I really desire, with the enigma of my own desire" (42). Because of habit or pure laziness Harry desires the same thing that he used to desire all of his life – what the other desires. This gives him safety and a sense of belonging, numbing the need to confront the emptiness within himself.

Requiem for a Dream can be therefore seen as a critique of American consumerism. Booker writes that "the dream for which the film serves as requiem is nothing less than the American dream itself, here depicted as reduced by the logic of consumerism to a debased and commodified vision of better living through increased consumption" (42). According to Peter Stearns' definition, consumerism "describes a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or for traditional display" (ix). The characters in the novel are members of such a society. Their craving for things determines who they are and persistently influences what they want. In reality Sara wants her family life to be perfect and permanent, while Harry wants to escape his material situation. Neither of them can see beyond commodities, unable to understand that "the objects around which desire is organized are imaginary objects" (Bailly 111), so they turn to the television set and reach for the bag with drugs.

Barry Giles points out the futility of these urges, as the characters constantly "lie to themselves that [happiness] is possible; and the surrounding capitalist society encourages their lies" (98). Because the characters are so deeply rooted in materialistic culture, the television set and the bag filled with drugs are the physical emblems of their dreams. Giles furthers his argument as follows:

> as the novel progresses, the concept of a "pound of pure" broadens until it is not only a term signifying a concrete, measurable amount of heroin, but a metaphor or signification of an abstract ideal of happiness. Harry and Tyrone, as well as Marion and Sara, want to acquire a "pure" [tangible, indestructible, and thus unobtainable] degree of happiness and peace. (98)

Victims of their own naivety, the characters are doomed to fail at reaching their dreams, which is already implied by the nature of their desire. As they only tend to understand what is tangible and visible, they will never be able to grasp something abstract. Instead of pursuing happiness, they attribute it to commodities. Even though they both crave permanence they look for it in temporary objects. Arthur Asa Berger refers to commodities as "objects of our affection. These objects are embedded in our lives and reflect, in various ways, ideas we have about these objects and how they should look, how they should function, and the role they should play in our lives" (116).

From the four "careers" of heroin users introduced by Chuck Faupel – the occasional user, the stable user, the free-wheeling addict and the street junkie – the first three may as well be applied to the television addict (qtd. in Carwath and Smith 79–85). The connection between the two is not a strong one, yet it illustrates the similarities between different stages of addiction and immersion. Selby implies that all obsessions are at their core basically the same – they are attempts to fill an inner void, while their causes are usually abstruse. Consumers tend to ignore the fact that "purchasing goods, far from being a private decision, is a fundamentally social act, with far-reaching consequences" (Glickman 3). They cannot fathom the ways in which their decisions influence not only their lives, but also the lives of others. They also fail to understand their dependence on the objects of their desire. Television and drugs are presented in the novel as means of control that elicit in the consumer the craving for more. Although the characters are able to experience short-lasting bliss through these commodities, in the long run "the addict is made dependent on a commodity that in turn commodifies him or her" (Giles 103).

In other words, they are crushed by the same system that has created them. Whether it is caused by commercials on the screen or the chemicals circulating in the body, the consumer is in constant need of stimulation. Only through obtaining new objects like clothes, chocolates or bags filled with drugs can the characters satisfy their urges, even though, as Berger observes, the results of such actions are only momentary, because "we are, so to speak, hardwired to want things endlessly, since having things is an instinctive need we have to feel alive and good" (41). The unawareness of "the inescapable consequences of shopping, the fact that buying a good directly affected its makers, sellers, and the environment, necessitated consumer responsibility" (Glickman 5) defines consumer communities. It is through naivety or rejection of obvious facts that one is still able to remain a member of such community and focus solely on consumption.

4. "A pound of pure"

As noted earlier, apart from "a pound of pure," Harry wants to buy a coffee shop and run it with his girlfriend, Marion. The pound of drugs' and the coffee shop's presence, as flawed as they may be, will be a physical – therefore the only acceptable – proof that he achieved something, because, as Giles points out, "Harry believes, like his mother and so many actual Americans, that his essential reality can only be proven through active consumerism. Ironically it is the fragile nature of his economic position that he seeks to escape through heroin" (105). Because Marion embodies a higher social status than Harry, he needs commodities to feel equal to her.

Sara needs commodities because she is programmed by her set to want everything that television claims is desirable, as "man's desire finds its meaning in the other's desire" (Lacan 2006, 222). Sara's objectification is so far-reaching that for her the actor Robert Redford is just a commodity that can be rented for the weekend. Television is to blame here since, as pointed out by George Lipsitz, in the post-war years it "emerged as the most important discursive medium in American culture […] charged with special responsibilities for making new economic and social relations credible and legitimate" (42). Television was supposed to enforce a new vision of the American Dream – owning a house with a fence and living with a nuclear family.

Some sociologists "have suggested that television performs a function of 'anticipatory socialization,' whereby people use the mediated view of status groups higher than their own [which they see on television] as models they can emulate" (Fiske and Hartley 83). Sara dreams of wearing her best dress on television and looking beautiful and slim, just like all the beautiful, flawless people she constantly sees on the screen – she desires to become the desire of the other. In order to lose weight and fit in her dress, Sara turns to diet books, but even the television set cannot make her forget about the hunger she is experiencing. Instead of eating less, Sara consumes boxes of chocolates looking at the screen and winking at the characters in the commercials. Once again blind to the incompleteness of her experience, Sara fails to see the futility of her dream, which will eventually lead to her downfall.

Sara cannot escape the illusion of reality created by television programming. When she gets a phone call from the McDick Corporation, inviting her to participate in one of the shows, she immediately looks at the television screen because the voice is so "bright and cheery and so enthusiastic and real" (Selby 19) that she thinks it is coming from there. At first, she is aware of the difference between the real and the virtual, yet the phone call foreshadows the confusion that she will experience later on, when people start coming out of her television set. Fiske and Hartley, in their discussion of television realism, observe that it is natural for human beings to immerse themselves in that illusion:

> Pre-television codes (our everyday experience) predispose us to believe that what we see on the screen is actually happening. The broadcasters rely on this habit of thought, using it successfully to create the real. Once the "real" is established as such, it becomes a vehicle for the communication of messages which embody, not our "real" social relationships, but rather cultural mythologies about these relationships. (137)

Sara's community consists of elderly women who divide their time between watching television and gossiping. Apart from the few moments they spend in the sun, the women "are fixed in a place, partitioned from one another, and emptied of political effectiveness," victims of what Crary calls television's "anti-nomadic" effect (81). Obsessed with television and its realism, they are immediately impressed by Sara's "success" and give her a special place on the bench in the sun. Sara, feeling like a celebrity from the shows she is so devotedly watching, accepts their kindness as something natural, something she deserves. In a sense, this confirms Williams' diagnosis of broadcasting as "a new and powerful form of social integration and control" (16) – Sara feels that her neighbors are fond of her and through her they hope to enhance their own experience of television. Still, these moments are scarce since after reaffirming her position among the women, Sara gladly returns to her apartment and enjoys her favorite entertainment in solitude. When the woman gets no response from the station and stops leaving her apartment sinking deeper into her addiction, the neighbors forget about her until it is too late.

When Harry takes away her television set, Sara locks herself in the closet. According to Giles, the scene "foreshadow[s] the manner in which her already narrow life will become more and more restricted until, in a very real sense, she ceases to exists at all" (105). The lack felt by Sara, caused by misplaced desire, and aggravated with pills she uses to lose weight, ultimately reduces her to an empty shell, making her permanently absent-minded. Sara becomes incomplete physically, as a person – she has a body, but her mind is gone. Concerned with appearances, she becomes a mere appearance. Sara's physical incompleteness is caused by her reliance on amphetamine pills. Instead of dieting, she stops eating at all and her hunger also contributes to her hallucinations. Curiously, it is insanity that frees the woman from her addictions.

According to the four "careers" of heroin users proposed by Faupel (qtd. in Carwath and Smith 83), at the beginning of the novel Harry Goldfarb is stable: "The key element in this phase of an addict's career is that life structure is maintained and an ample supply of heroin has been secured" (Carnwath and Smith 83). As "stable use is compatible with work," Harry is able to continue his daily routine of working and using heroin. But because Harry hates work and cannot wait to quit his job, in order to remain a stable user he must obtain "a pound of pure." His plan, involving selling and using the same stash of heroin, epitomizes his naivety and overconfidence. In one of his fantasies Harry pictures himself as

a drug dealer making an important transaction, once again revealing his exaggerated belief in himself. Harry also underestimates the power and addictiveness of heroin. The image of an old junkie, whom Tyrone met in jail, is persistently on Harry's mind but instead of considering it a warning, Harry feels superior to the old addict and thinks that he will rather commit suicide than allow heroin to control his life.

Marion, Harry and Tyrone constantly deny that they are addicted. Even when she starts to have sex for heroin, Marion is still unwilling to admit that she has a problem. Harry escapes addiction only because of his physical wound – his arm is infected, goes green and eventually must be amputated. Only when he loses his arm is he able to see the results of drug abuse: "As junkies, drug users suddenly become visible. A stable user would not be recognized in the street, whereas a junkie is clearly a junkie" (Carnwath and Smith 85). By becoming physically incomplete Harry finally sees the incompleteness within himself. He realizes that he was a junkie, but now, without the arm into which he injected heroin, he finally frees himself from the dream of "a pound of pure."

Conclusion

Sara and Harry try to save each other but fail because of the inability to communicate properly. During their last meeting Harry brings his mother a big screen television set that he has bought her with the drug money. Sara is bursting with joy, grateful for the gift, but what makes her happier is the news that Harry has a girlfriend. In a sense, she shows him the way out of his addiction – he should marry Marion and have children, start a family, fulfill the American Dream. He ignores the advice, mainly because it comes from his mother. However, Sara does not listen to her son either, when he suggests she should put away the amphetamine pills. Sara grinds her teeth and tells her son that she has not felt so much joy in years. In the end, fully aware of the power of the drug induced reality, Harry gives up, seeing how happy she is. The new television set is a symbol of their miscommunication: Harry assumes that it is what his mother is dreaming of, while she actually wants a family, "a happy ending" (Selby 118); Sara assumes that since Harry can afford such a gift he is well-off, therefore happy. The inability to understand, let alone talk about, what they really want leaves them both unfulfilled and alone.

Lacan notes that "there is not a good and a bad object; there is good and bad, and then there is the Thing" (1992, 77). The television set and the bag of drugs are what Lacan would refer to as "*objet a*: entity that has no substantial consistency, which in itself is 'nothing but confusion,' and which acquires a definite shape only when looked at from a standpoint slanted by the subject's desires and fears – as such, as a mere 'shadow of what it is not'" (Žižek 69). Both commodities are

meaningless from different perspectives, but Sara and Harry are provided with a distinct point of view only when it is too late. The two objects become dangerous once they are elevated to the level of the Thing.

The world in *Requiem for a Dream* is purely physical, so only what is done to the body can be felt and understood by the characters. Sara and Harry, mother and son, both become incomplete like the objects they are pursuing. According to Selby himself, the novel is not about the American Dream of "prosperity, property, prestige, etc.," but "the cancer of that dream" (qtd. in Lemons), how its pursuit destroys an individual. Sara and Harry, driven by the desire of the other, instead of fitting in, transgress and are crushed by the same system that instilled that desire within them.

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