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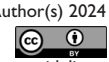

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A Psychoanalytic Reconsideration of Chemsex and Anti-Retroviral Time: Or, *It's G O'Clock*

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Abstract

This article intervenes in contemporary critical scholarship on the ethics of chemsex and other so-called 'risky' gay male sexual practices through a careful appraisal of psychoanalytic theory on subjectivity and sexuality. I argue that the emerging field of critical chemsex studies prioritises contemporary approaches to 'bodies and pleasures' at the expense of subjectivity, leading to an inability to adequately theorise some participants' avowed experiences of suffering from problematic chemsex use. Drawing critically on previous psychoanalytic scholarship on barebacking, I argue that, contrary to stereotypical depictions, chemsex may be motivated not by a self-destructive death drive, but rather a paradoxical attempt to *shelter* oneself from this drive. This idea may helpfully counter the psychoanalytic tendency to exceptionalise or pathologise gay male sexual practices, while also questioning the ethical valence attributed to chemsex. I conclude with an exploration of Lacanian ethics and the implications this may hold for critical chemsex studies and public health.

Keywords

drugs, ethics, Lacan, psychoanalysis, queer, sex, time

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> The traditional moralist always falls back into the rut of persuading us that pleasure is good, that the path leading to good is blazed by pleasure. (Lacan, 1997: 228)

The subtitle of this article refers to a short, fictional film by Mitchell Marion (2016) that tells a story of pleasure and risk against the backdrop of the 'chemsex scene' in contemporary London. It begins with an exchange between Leigh, whose lover has fallen unconscious from a GHB overdose, and a paramedic, Alex, arriving to help. 'Don't I know you?', Leigh asks Alex, who answers in the negative. In the following scene, the two cross paths again, this time at the start of a chemsex party (a gathering of gay men to take drugs, socialise and have sex) in a London flat. An iPhone alarm goes off, and the host of the party announces, 'It's G O'clock, bitches!' Viewers familiar with the subcultural protocols of the chemsex scene (Bourne et al., 2004; Møller and Hakim, 2023) will recognise this as an invitation for partygoers to take their hourly dose of GHB – a harm reduction strategy devised around the unusually dose-sensitive nature of the drug and its half-life in the body (a millilitre too much, or too soon, can tip the scales from euphoria to unconsciousness).

Alex begins to measure his dose. 'So *you* do G?', Leigh asks him, surprised to see a paramedic consuming the substance responsible for so many calls to A&E. 'Yeah, of course', answers Alex. 'But unlike you, I'm experienced enough to handle my shit responsibly'. Alex then issues an imperative that combines harm reduction with erotic submission: 'Tonight, you're gonna stick with me. We're never gonna do this more than once an hour. I'm gonna make sure you have a good time'.

Predictably, things don't go as promised. Despite the careful dosing regime, Leigh passes out. Rather than risk losing his job by calling an ambulance, Alex puts him in bed to 'sleep it off' and resolves to check on him periodically. The party's 'G O'clock' timer goes off yet again, but Alex declines the next dose. He visits and discovers someone raping his unconscious friend. Alex throws him off and realises Leigh has stopped breathing. The film ends with Alex performing CPR, confidently pronouncing he can resuscitate Leigh, leaving the audience to wonder whether he'll succeed.

While critical audiences may accuse the short film of sensationalising drug use and gay sociality, its repeated references to time dramatise an interesting paradox that, I believe, is relevant to more general, non-moralistic thinking about chemsex and subjectivity. Indeed, we might understand the term 'G O'clock' as a useful, if ambiguous, temporal concept. At one level, the term 'G O'clock' signifies the chemsexual subject's masterful manipulation of time to maximise pleasure while minimising harm. Through carefully calibrated ritual, the subject appears to achieve a kind of joyous triumph over the threat of death. Yet the brute, infinite automaticity of the clock – the fact that time never stops – brings into view the inescapability of mortality and raises the spectre of human mastery's undoing. 'G O'clock' can't go on forever; or rather, *it will go on beyond my survival*: even if a perfectly executed dosing regimen prevents me from overdosing at first, I cannot survive an infinite number of doses – more fundamentally, nobody survives the infinity of time. Against this never-ending 'Real' of time – a seemingly objective phenomenon indifferent to human intervention – a question of subjectivity, enjoyment and finitude opens.

This somewhat speculative indulgence draws on Freud's (1920) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he develops the notion of 'repetition compulsion' to account for patients' propensity to repeat experiences that fail to deliver recognisable forms of pleasure. Such a compulsion, Freud concludes, cannot be understood as an attempt to master trauma, but appears driven by a 'daemonic' force that Freud (1920: 35) names the 'death drive', and that Lacan later develops with his notion of *jouissance*, a pleasure-in-excess that pursues an infinity beyond the subject's mortal finitude. At their core, these concepts put into relation problems of mastery, repetition, pleasure and death, and therefore seem apposite to considerations of sex and drugs. However, the death drive, and psychoanalytic thinking more generally, is an area that recent critical scholarship on chemsex (Møller and Hakim, 2023; see below) – in its laudable effort to depathologise the practice – has largely rejected or avoided.

In this article, I wish to intervene in and complicate such scholarship by exploring how a careful appraisal of relevant psychoanalytic ideas forces us to reject what I identify, following Leo Bersani (2010), as a 'redemptive' strain in queer theoretical writing on chemsex and other

so-called 'risky' gay sexual practices.[1] I will do so by, first, reviewing relevant aspects of the literature in the emerging field of 'critical chemsex studies', with a focus on the field's attempt to locate ethical possibilities in 'risky' sex alongside its eschewal of psychoanalytic conceptualisations of divided subjectivity. Responding to this, I will introduce the psychoanalytic concepts of drive, jouissance and superego – which pose the problem of a subject at odds with itself and its pleasures – demonstrating these concepts' relevance to questions of chemsex, as well as their potential misuse by queer psychoanalytic theorists. Here, I will develop the counterintuitive idea that participation in chemsex may sometimes be motivated not by a simple embrace of the death drive, but rather a management of pleasure that aims, however successfully, at *sheltering* itself from this drive. This idea, as I will explain, may helpfully counter the psychoanalytic tendency to exceptionalise or pathologise gay male sexual practices, while also questioning the ethical valence attributed to chemsex. I will conclude with an exploration of Lacanian ethics and the implications this may hold for critical chemsex studies and public health.

The Emergence of Critical Chemsex Studies

In response to the moral panic surrounding chemsex, critical scholars have recently offered recuperative and non-judgemental readings of the practice. Møller and Hakim (2023) helpfully categorise 'three axes' along which the emerging field of 'critical chemsex studies' has developed: one challenging the paradigm of 'risk' within public health contexts; another studying the cultural, discursive and technological landscape of chemsex; and a third focused on questions of pleasure and identity. This otherwise diverse body of scholarship often shares in common a consideration of the ethical possibilities of 'risky' gay male sex, whether conceived of as a practice of opening towards otherness (Bersani and Phillips, 2008), the promotion of alternative kinship structures (Dean, 2009), a creative revisioning of queer futurity (Florêncio, 2020a), an incipient resistance to neoliberalism (Hakim, 2019), the cultivation of new forms of intimacy (Pienaar et al., 2020) or a multiplication of the body's capacities for pleasure (Race, 2009).

Much of this work owes a debt to Tim Dean's (2009) auto-ethnography on the subculture of barebacking, *Unlimited Intimacy*, which

drew on Lacanian theory to depathologise and critically explore the phenomenon of gay men practicing unprotected anal sex and their attendant fantasies of HIV transmission. Around the same time as this landmark study, psychoanalytic queer theorist Leo Bersani and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2008) produced a series of provocations on barebacking in their book *Intimacies*. While both works sketched out an ethics of barebacking – related to the way the practice facilitates an encounter with otherness – they did so with explicit consideration for the role of the unconscious in human sexuality and of the challenges their ethics posed towards any kind of identitarian political project.

The advent and significant uptake of daily pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) among gay men, which, used as prescribed, nearly eliminates the risk of HIV transmission from condomless sex, has thrown into doubt the relevance of Dean, Bersani and Phillips' observations for the contemporary gay sexual landscape (see Varghese, 2019). As Dean (2019) himself observed, 'Paradoxically, as more men fuck without condoms, we become less certain about what that means (p. 285)'. More recent critical scholarship exploring the conjunction of sex and risk among gay men has instead focused on 'chemsex', a term popularised by public health professionals within the United Kingdom's National Health Service to refer to the rise of gay men's use of drugs including methamphetamine ('crystal meth'), mephedrone and GHB/GBL in group settings involving sex (Stuart, 2019) – given a more critical gloss by Kane Race (Hakim and Race, 2023: 3) as 'a particular constellation of technologies, material settings, modes of consumption and sexual vernaculars'. Somewhat concomitant with this shift has been the falling out of fashion of psychoanalytic approaches within what might be broadly called queer theory. Hence, critical chemsex literature draws on areas including actor-network theory, affect theory, posthumanism and science and technology studies, often taking Deleuze and Foucault, rather than Freud and Lacan, as its theoretical North star.

In his qualitative study of gay and bisexual men who engage in chemsex, Jamie Hakim (2019) theorises the practice as 'an embodied response to material conditions shaped by neoliberalism' (p. 249), including the rise of 'competitive individualism as the privileged mode of being in the world' and the disappearance, due to gentrification, of bars and clubs where gay men could socialise and have sex.

Chemsex emerges in Hakim's (2019) work as a precursor to queer political resistance: the practice 'remind[s] gay and bisexual men of the joys of collectively feeling together in ways that demonstrate that the hegemony of neoliberalism is not as totalizing as some accounts might suggest' (pp. 270–271). Hakim views the 'good feelings' that circulate in chemsexual encounters as a generative site for alternatives to our hegemonic political order. With explicit reference to ethics, he argues that his 'affective analysis' aims 'to determine precisely what combination of joy and sadness' chemsex entails, 'and with what consequences this has for pursuing an ethical life – one in which joyful affects can be consciously created between bodies' (Hakim, 2019: 260). The ethical aim, in other words, is to consciously maximise 'joy', which Hakim (2019) defines as an 'an augmentation in a body's capacity to act', and minimise sadness or 'its diminution' (p. 260).

Hakim's perspective receives further theoretical support from João Florêncio (2020a, 2023), who draws on Deleuzian theory to argue that 'sexualised drug use may catalyse positive affects that affirm the lives of queer subjects' (Florêncio, 2021: 11). In Florêncio's gloss, the chemical reactions 'catalysed' by chemsex include affects that 'affirm', and therefore, it is implied, have some ethical value. In keeping with affect studies approaches, emotional experiences are here described in objectified terms that separate them from the motivations of the subject who experiences them (in this case, a link is drawn between affect, the body and drug-taking, but not the drug-taker).

Less tentative than Hakim, Florêncio (2023) reads into chemsex revolutionary potential across multiple registers:

> [C]hemsex subcultures, their imaginaries and sexual scripts . . . can . . . disrupt hegemonic understandings of the male body and of the liberal subject . . . by eroticising the body's porosity to foreign matter . . . and by opening it to queer experiences of ecstatic time that are no longer connected with productivity, profit, or sexually-reproductive futurism . . . In so doing, the subcultural subjectivities chemsex reproduces throw a spanner in the works of the normative chronobiopolitics of heteropatriarchal culture. (p. 13)

We might say that, in Florêncio's work, 'G O'clock', or what he elsewhere calls 'antiretroviral time' (2020b), stands for the promise

of a utopic form of temporality, where the capitalist pressures of 'productivity' and 'profit' (time = money) are put to one side in the name of a queer form of play, where everything hegemonic is subverted and resignified. This description of an alternative form of time that is both lived within, yet pushes against, the time pressures we experience under capitalism, is not unlike how some have described the process of undergoing psychoanalysis – spending years lying on a couch saying whatever comes to mind – what Lisa Baraitser (2017) identified as a 'pre-eminent example of a "waste" of time in capitalist terms' (p. 17). However, against Baraitser's emphasis on the arduous demands of long durational practices like psychoanalysis, which require a subject to repeatedly confront painful aspects of the self, Florêncio (2020b) emphasises a time of 'ecstasy', a time of highs without lows: 'antiretroviral time', he writes (p. 207), 'has gifted us an imaginary of the present as a time of fucking without ending'. In the 'age of antiretrovirals', gay 'pigs', he argues (Florêncio, 2020a), can enjoy sex and generate kinships divorced from questions of transmission, excess and death (not to mention capitalist social reproduction).

Another significant approach to critical chemsex studies emerges out of actor-network theory and new materialism, which focuses on tracing the 'assemblage' of human and non-human entities – drugs, bodies, technologies, geographies, architectures, discourses and so on – that constitute chemsex (Malins, 2017; Pienaar et al., 2020; Race, 2015). This work is identifiable through its regular recourse to lists of terms meant to trouble familiar subject–object forms of causality, and to indicate the 'entangled', 'assembled' or otherwise multimodal nature of the phenomenon under question: 'drug practices and other objects and devices participate in the construction of sexual encounters: their pleasures, qualities, risks and potentialities' (Race, 2015: 253).

Although this work tends to be more descriptive in nature, there are clear ethical stakes involved. In addition to the widely shared impulse to offer an alternative, non-stigmatising portrayal of drug use, some actor network theorists propose that chemsex 'enact[s] queer identities' that 'generate novel forms of sociality and connections that exceed the prescriptive confines of heteronormative, gender binaries' (Pienaar et al., 2020: 6).

This approach also challenges notions of individual responsibility, arguing chemsex is a collective phenomenon that should not be approached from the starting point of the subject who desires sex and drugs, but rather the complex configuration of elements that engender the chemsexual 'scene' (Drysdale, 2021). 'An important implication of this relational approach', write Pienaar et al. (2020), 'is that it invites us to decentre the analytic focus on the human subject and attend more carefully to the agency of non-human as well as human actors in generating drug effects' (p. 2). Actor-network theory shares with psychoanalysis a criticism of the subject as a fully voluntarist agent; however, in placing the subject at the same level as other 'objective' intra-acting phenomena, the question of subjective division is bypassed.

A key problem shared across these approaches is that, by putting to one side conflictual sources of subjective motivation, our capacity for understanding a person's avowed experience of suffering or ambivalence surrounding drug use is diminished. The problem of drug mis- or overuse becomes all too easily reduced to an external, 'objective' flaw within the 'assemblage', not unlike a physiological approach to 'addiction' (see Palm, 2023). Hakim (2019), for example, places the problem of the 'negative affects' experienced through chemsex at the doorstep of neoliberalism, which 'has been so successful at diminishing the cultural spaces where potent collectivities can endure, that the . . . joyful affects [of chemsex] . . . can so easily mutate into . . . psychosis, addiction, . . . strangeness or discomfort' (p. 268).

While this helpfully 'de-individualises' subjectivity, rightfully placing it within the social sphere, its inability to theorise the subject's *own* contradictory wishes lends itself to oversimplifying 'negative' chemsex experiences as due solely to external forces, whether socio-political or physiological. As Dean (2015) explains further:

> If your understanding of human sexuality contains no conceptual room for fantasy or the unconscious as mediators of self-interest, then the notion of addiction is epistemologically irresistible because it explains how autonomy, self-preservation, and good intentions all become compromised biochemically. (p. 235)

Thus, when public health responses to chemsex are proposed within the critical chemsex framework, they often focus on an 'ethics

of care' or similar notions that rely on facilitating what chemsex users purportedly want (more good affects and less bad ones), without interrogating the intricacies, contradictions and unconscious dimensions of wanting as such. As I will develop, by putting this more complex question of subjective desire to one side, the problem of ethics is in fact overlooked. Although this may be particularly salient for those who experience their relation to chemsex as problematic, it raises important questions for the project of critical chemsex studies more generally.

Psychoanalytic reasoning begins from the premise that the 'extreme' or 'pathological' case is not 'separate', but rather illustrates something fundamental about universal psychological processes: 'Unless we can understand . . . pathological forms of sexuality and can co-ordinate them with normal sexual life', writes Freud (1917), 'we cannot understand normal sexuality either' (p. 307). If we accept this premise, it follows that a psychoanalytic approach should both 'de-exceptionalise' chemsex and attempt to discover within it something that pertains to, or enriches our knowledge of, human sexuality more generally.

Queer Pastoralism and the Question of Jouissance

Leo Bersani (2010) criticised queer theorists for promoting what he called a 'pastoral' or 'redemptive' notion of sexuality, where solipsistic, self-destructive or otherwise hedonistic sexual acts and desires are represented as compatible with liberal values: 'what we're really up to is pluralism and diversity, and getting buggered is just one moment in the practice of those laudable humanistic virtues' (p. 26).

What always threatens to corrupt this pastoral image is, according to Bersani, the unbinding nature of sexuality, which disrupts the comforts of identity and the coherence of the ego. That we never really know what we're getting into, when we're getting into sex – and that's the fun of it. This is a psychoanalytic theorisation of sex that takes seriously the popular idea that 'good sex' involves 'losing control', which can sometimes lead sexual subjects (including those who participate in chemsex) to feel that things have gotten 'out of control'.

To my mind, Bersani's criticism speaks to those occasionally celebratory aspects of the critical chemsex literature we have just

reviewed, which sometimes counter pathologising depictions of the practice by arguing that chemsex helps forge new 'subjectivities' or 'relationalities' – making chemsex serve a positive moral cause, what Florêncio calls 'a legitimate world-making practice'.

An alternative sexual ethics proposed by queer psychoanalytic theorists emphasises the theories of drive and jouissance (or enjoyment). It portrays queer sexual practices – especially 'risky' ones like chemsex and barebacking – as the apotheosis of a self-shattering jouissance, an 'ego-divesting discipline' where 'the subject allows himself to be penetrated, even replaced, by an unknowable otherness' (Bersani and Phillips, 2008: 35, 53; cf. Champagne, 2016). This is a different, negativistic ethics, involving an embrace of the death drive, which received its most forceful and notorious articulation in Lee Edelman's (2004) *No Future*.

However, this psychoanalytic framing raises the question: do such sexual practices truly reach the ecstatic heights of jouissance that theorists attribute to them? In my view, there may be a false opposition between 'pastoral' and 'negative' queer ethics: neither adequately account for the *impossibility* written into the theory of jouissance, and the subject's attempts to grapple with or compensate for this. The subject's *struggle* with jouissance is, I will argue, the place from which psychoanalytic ethics proper proceeds.

To address this issue, we must revisit the psychoanalytic theorisation of sexuality, drive and jouissance. We will do so alongside occasionally drawing on published accounts of chemsex usage, to better appreciate the relevance of a psychoanalytic framework, and the 'ordinariness' of chemsex in relation to it.

Sexual Pleasure in Psychoanalysis

The complex writings on sexuality and the drive in psychoanalysis are ultimately concerned with the following problems: as humans, we seek sexual satisfaction in unlikely places that may defy reproductive expectations; we are often unaware of what gets us off (or even the fact we *are*, at some level, getting off, when it seems we are suffering); we cannot easily manipulate our sexual object choices; and we will sometimes pursue our unique mode(s) of getting off at the expense of everything else – including our own survival. Lauren Berlant's (2011) work explored this in terms of our

paradoxical libidinal attachment to ideals that harm us. Her point is well illustrated in the cover image of *Cruel Optimism*, which shows a dog wearing a cone, attempting to bite its tail, in a torturous form of pleasure that speaks to the problem of split subjectivity: I ought not to want this, but I pursue it nevertheless.

Freud presents sexuality as perpetually in conflict with the ego. The 'polymorphously perverse' child derives sexual pleasure from innumerable bodily zones and countless objects, until the force of parental and social prohibition pushes certain behaviours and desires underground. In its quest for love, approval and recognition, the child forms an 'ego' that represses the drive energies and their associated illicit desires. The ego functions as a boundary against the sexual drives – an unstable one that regularly threatens collapse.

Freud theorises these drives as emerging from the organic need for bodily nourishment but pursuing a 'beyond' or excess of this need. He gives the example of the 'auto-erotic' activity of thumb sucking. Such activity emerges, Freud (1905: 181) argues, out of 'a search for some pleasure which has already been experienced and is now remembered', namely the 'sucking at his mother's breast, or at substitutes for it'. The taking in of nourishment from the other provides a form of pleasure that libido 'attaches itself to' (p. 182), and then moves to ever-inventive substitutions when that pleasure is not readily to hand (see Laplanche and Pontalis, 1974: 46).

Thus, in Freud the drives circulate around an initial loss – the loss of satisfaction – which, because it cannot be retrieved, enables an infinite, repetitious, and creative pursuit: sexuality. (Lacan would later theorise this initial 'loss' as a foundational, unfillable 'lack', which is only retroactively fantasised as a prelapsarian lost fulfilment.) The Freudian subject is thus divided between the drives' unquenchable appetite for perverse pleasures and the ego's attempts to follow lawful compromises for satisfaction. The sexual drives pursue that which is 'other' and threatening to the ego and are ultimately in favour of the ego's dissolution.

Within this conceptualisation, libido-enhancing drugs might be seen as harnessing and mobilising the drives. Such drugs produce rushes of neurochemicals that intensify bodily stimulation. Under the influence, the subject is presented with the conditions upon which sexual fantasies may be more easily elaborated and indulged; however, such intensified stimulation may also threaten the ego,

generating the experience of extreme highs suddenly descending into anxiety, paranoia, and shame with no perceptible change in the degree of physiological stimulation. 'What's crazy', says one interviewee, 'is that each time the best chemsex experience turns into the worst' (in Milhet et al., 2019: 15).

It is often said that poppers facilitate the loosening of the sphincteric muscles, thereby making anal intercourse easier. (In fact, this argument was presented in front of the British Parliament – with support from openly gay Tory MP Crispin Blunt – to secure the drug's legality within the 2016 Psychoactive Substances Bill (Perraudin, 2016).) Less remarked upon is the *dissociative* effect of poppers: take a huff, and you may momentarily forget where you are and with whom you are having sex. This pleasurable form of temporary ego suspension may ease penetration at least as much as physiological muscle relaxation.

What I'm trying to illustrate with this example is the fundamental conflict at the heart of the human subject, as theorised by Freud: a wish both to fortify *and* undermine the sexually repressive structure of the ego. Sex, in the Freudian account, arouses disgust and shame not solely because it has been pathologised by a sex- (and queer-) phobic culture – although this matters too – but because it raises the spectre of our division, the fact that we are each inhabited by an unconscious and by drives that we would rather not know about.

Jouissance, Desire and Drive in Lacan

Lacanian psychoanalysis names the form of intense pleasure that threatens the self and is admixed with pain 'jouissance' (see Braunstein, 2020; cf. Leader, 2021). Two things must be appreciated about jouissance which queer accounts of it sometimes neglect. First, *failure* is built into Lacan's theory of jouissance. Within the experience of jouissance lies the failure of 'total' jouissance – jouissance never achieves the ultimate Thing, the totalising annihilation and/or fusion, to which it aims (Lacan, 2006: 696; Miller, 2000: 18–23).[2] Therefore, accounts which place 'dangerous' and/or 'promiscuous' sex on the side of jouissance may inadvertently reproduce the prejudicial fantasy that queers experience an unlimited enjoyment in a manner inaccessible to others (see Hook, 2018).

Second, the troubling conflict that jouissance produces in the subject cannot be overcome. The drive's pursuit of jouissance, which is

never satisfied, can take a compulsive character, and can threaten the loss of all we (consciously) hold dear. The actual sexual practices we choose to engage in often represent a delicate, unstable compromise between the pursuit of jouissance and the wish to maintain our symbolic consistency.

Here, we can be further assisted by the distinction between desire and drive posed in the Lacanian literature (see Collins, 1997; Miller, 1996). Desire involves the pursuit of the 'lost object' that can never be obtained. If desire is fulfilled, it ceases to exist. To put it in terms of cruising: it is the search for 'something' in each partner that is never ultimately found, leading from one partner to the next in a potentially infinite series, which may be facilitated by libido-enhancing drugs and group sexual encounters. Lacan's dictum that 'desire is desire of the Other' identifies desire as an effect of language, and therefore as something that is always alienating. One's desires are never fully one's own but are rather implicated in one's subjection to language as mediated through early caregivers and other significant figures.

Lacan develops Freud's notion of drive into desire's moebius-like underside. The Lacanian drive involves the jouissance that *does* occur within the pursuit of desire, and that serves as desire's 'motor force'. As Lacan (1998) states, '[W]hen you stuff the mouth – the mouth that opens in the register of the drive – it is not the food that satisfies it, it is, as one says, the pleasure of the mouth' (p. 167). To return to our cruising analogy: at the level of drive, it is not about the partner that promises an illusory end to the pursuit of pleasure, but rather the (constitutively incomplete) pleasure obtained from each 'stuffing of the mouth'. While desire is marked by its insatiability, the drive is where hunger and satisfaction collide. 'When we "stuff our mouths"', Alenka Zupančič (2011) explains, 'we satisfy the drive, *whether we want to or not.* And in spite of the fact that the object we consume will never be "it", some part of "it" is produced in the very act of consumption. It is precisely this "some part of it" that is the true object of the drive' (p. 243).

The drive enjoys the thing it cannot have; indifferent to the temporary relief of orgasm, it pursues temporal infinity – G O'clock.

Death Drive and the Temporality of Chemsex

In grappling with the question of why patients repetitively revisit painful or traumatic experiences, Freud (1920) was led to the conclusion that there was a 'beyond' to the pleasure principle; not all neuroses could be understood as the consequence of a conflict between pleasure-seeking drives and restrictions imposed by the ego. Freud (1920) theorised a 'death drive', in conflict with the more ordinary pursuit of libidinal satisfaction, which sought to 'restore an earlier state of things . . . the quiescence of the inorganic world' (p. 62). Lacan (2006) made the dialectical leap of concluding that 'every drive is virtually a death drive' (p. 719). Not because one is necessarily driven to pursue death, but because the compulsiveness of the drive can exceed the limits of the subject's physical survival. Hence, in Lacan's reframing, the 'pleasure principle' always involves a 'beyond', the 'daemonic' aspect that Freud (1920: 35) referred to. The drive pursues jouissance, indifferent to the consequences. As Zupančič (2011) clarifies, 'The drive can be "mortal" precisely *because it is indifferent to death* (as well as to life); because it is not preoccupied with death, because death does not interest it' (p. 250).

Popular discussions of chemsex often fixate on the temporal duration of sessions. *G O'Clock*, for example, depicts several hourly iPhone alarms, multiple consecutive sex scenes and a sunrise, to represent and highlight this expansive sexual temporality within its mere 10 minutes of film. It is often remarked upon how participants carry on for hours, or days, without orgasm. 'If you do come', says one interviewee, 'that doesn't make you stop and think, "Okay, now I'm going to make you a cup of tea and have a cigarette", if you know what I mean. You still want to keep going' (in Pienaar et al., 2020: 5).

This temporal extension of non-orgasmic pleasure might be read along the axes of either desire or drive. On the level of desire, we might see the prolongation of sexual activity, and multiplication of sexual partners, as a determined search for the ultimate orgasm. Orgasms are delayed in the hope of achieving the one to put an end to them all – full jouissance. On the level of drive, however, pleasure does not defer itself in relation to an inaccessible jouissance, but rather occurs within the inconclusive, and therefore potentially infinite and potentially deadly repetition ('*It's G'Oclock bitches!' as a regular, never-ending refrain*). 'You always want it, regardless of

whether you're the top or the bottom nothing satisfies you. It's crazy!' says a chemsex participant (in Milhet et al., 2019: 16).

Yet, contrary to sensationalist portrayals of chemsex as a hedonistic plunge into an unlimited jouissance, the practices and rituals surrounding chemsex involve many confrontations with limit, waiting, delay and deferral: from multiple rejections or disappointments on hook-up apps (generating repetitive scrolling, refreshing and messaging), to opening and closing browser tabs in the search for the 'right' pornography, to waiting for drugs to take effect and their subsequent waves of euphoria and dysphoria. It is perhaps not coincidental that, within the context of both drug-induced memory loss and the temporal 'blur' that long durational practices generate, these moments of seeming frustration and punctuation can be the most memorable aspects of a session. 'I looked around and I saw the saddest thing', said one interviewee: 'everyone was on their phones, on Grindr, and on Scruff, and no one was talking. They were all rubbing their own cocks, desperately trying to get erect' (in Milhet et al., 2019: 16). Enjoyment is contingent upon the fact that there are barriers to total enjoyment. Desire attempts, in vain, to overcome these barriers; drive is what continues to 'get off' precisely because the limit cannot be surmounted.

Defending Against Death With Death

Rather than view the potential compulsiveness of chemsex as a direct consequence of the drive (a thesis that contains the sensationalised implication that 'risky' sex is exemplary of the death drive), we might consider the counterintuitive possibility that for some participants, chemsex functions as an attempt to *keep the drive at bay*. Zupančič (2011) writes, 'In the psychoanalytic clinic one often encounters this paradoxical figure: the subject defending himself against death with death, defending himself against the "death drive" by a sort of mortification' (pp. 245–250). She is invoking the figure of the obsessional neurotic, who constructs elaborate rituals designed to protect himself from an encounter with his lack and to ward off the threat of jouissance (see Fink, 1999: 112–164; Gessert, 2020). The classical obsessional neurotic is said to live a 'mortified' life. He is determined to cover over his self-division and the conflicts this produces. In so doing, he sacrifices his 'aliveness' to life. He lives a kind of

death-in-life, through obsessive obedience to rituals that close down the possibility of reckoning with his desire and confronting his drive. Hyper-alert to the spectre of mortality and finitude that the drive calls forth, he chooses subjective mortification instead.

But the very attempt to ward off jouissance can become its own kind of jouissance, in a perverse short-circuit. Indeed, one of Lacan's (2006: 240) examples of jouissance comes from Freud's (1909) case study of the 'Rat Man'. As this patient recounted an obsessional thought regarding his fear of anal torture involving rats, Freud (1909) writes that his face displayed 'a strange, composite expression . . . horror at a pleasure of . . . which he himself was unaware' (p. 167).

From here, it is a short distance to the idea that one might obsessionally defend against jouissance through the very activities associated with it, such as chemsex. As we saw earlier, the harm reduction strategies foregrounded in *G O'Clock* involve a careful calibration of doses that appear both to master, and flirt with, the threat of overdose. Rather than see this as a plain conflict between the drive pursuing chemical gratification and the ego striving for abstinence, we might understand the entire operation as the ego attempting to shelter itself from the drive through the regulation, or 'dose-ification', of jouissance: the carefully regulated administration of enjoyment, in an attempt to appease that which is ultimately unappeasable (see Loose, 2002). The potential compulsiveness of such activities, particularly the push-pull of 'I want to/I ought not to' that characterises certain forms of 'addictive' behaviour, might here be understood as akin to an obsessional ritual, such as the Rat Man's removing a stone from the middle of the road and then returning it, unable to choose between a hostile and a protective impulse. One interviewee refers to the popular use of a 'nightmap' during chemsex gatherings: 'a printed excel spreadsheet that noted participants' names, the time at which they had taken chemsex drugs . . . and the dose they had consumed' (in Hakim, 2019: 261). The obsessional is seduced by that which he strives to master, driven into increasingly complex propositions to manage the circuitry of his desire.

This example is not intended to denigrate harm reduction as a public health strategy, which is undoubtedly superior to anti-drug propaganda and enforcement. Rather, it offers us a way of grasping the limits of 'safer' pleasure-seeking activities, including understanding why these commitments sometimes backfire, without resorting to

exclusively biochemical explanations of addiction. Lacan saw the obsessional's struggles with jouissance as particularly destructive, insofar as his strenuous effort to avoid the death drive puts him in a stranglehold with the most dangerous aspects of this drive. As Zupančič (2011) put it, 'Death proves to be the best shelter against the death drive' (p. 254).

We should be clear, moreover, that this is merely one interpretation of the potential motivations involved in chemsex – if accurate, it will only apply to some participants.[3] Chemsex surely involves a range of conscious and unconscious motivations particular to each individual and their psychic organisation; while some may experience chemsex as compulsive, others may find it unremarkable or inconsequential. Yet, the tantalising notion of chemsex as an embrace of the death drive presents itself all too easily to psychoanalytic readings of the practice, inviting anti-psychoanalytic responses. Another relation to the death drive, characterised by the struggle to regulate an enjoyment that threatens to overwhelm, seems at least equally pertinent – especially in a neoliberal society where the superego demands consumer enjoyment.

The Superegoic Injunction to 'Enjoy!'

The commonplace understanding of the superego is an 'internal policeman', a mental agency that enforces the rules. However, Freud (1930) had something more difficult and dysfunctional in mind: a form of aggression turned inward, masquerading as 'moral conscience', which grows stronger and more punitive the more that the subject attempts to obey its commands: 'every fresh renunciation increases the [superego's] severity and intolerance', he writes (p. 130). As Lacan (1997) put it, 'the insatiable character of this moral conscience, its paradoxical cruelty, transforms it within the individual into a parasite that is fed by the satisfactions accorded it' (p. 372). The superego obtains a kind of perverse pleasure in the subject's failure to live up to its ideals, and therefore promotes a vicious cycle of transgression and guilt. Like the drive, the superego functions at a level beyond voluntary manipulation; however, unlike the drive, it is 'imported' from the Other, and cannot be subjectively assumed as one's own.

Žižek (1999) has argued, following Lacan (1999: 3), that contemporary late capitalism has generated a 'postmodern' superego, which,

rather than enforcing Victorian sexual conservativism, commands the subject – in good consumerist fashion – to 'Enjoy!'. This mode of superego is characterised by the sense that one is never enjoying *enough*, or in the *right way*, especially in comparison with others who may appear to enjoy more. Zupančič (2003) adds that the injunction to enjoy is made even more tortuous through its combination with various pressures to succeed, be healthy, and maintain 'balance': 'On the one hand, the imperative 'Enjoy!', and, on the other, the reminder that we are also constantly bombarded with: 'Enjoyment can kill you!', 'Enjoy! – but be aware that enjoyment can kill you' (p. 68). That chemsex might involve the attempt to dose-ify jouissance makes sense against the backdrop of this contemporary superegoic landscape. One feels a relentless pressure to experience an enjoyment that is always out of reach, while simultaneously attempting to shield oneself from the self-undermining nature of drive.

Pienaar et al. (2020: 7–8) calls for a 'more-than-harm-reduction approach' to chemsex, which facilitates users' attempts to 'maximise drug-related benefits and minimise potential harms'. Such an approach, I would caution, may inadvertently lend itself precisely to this superegoic ideology of enjoyment, reinforcing some to feel a painful distance from a 'maximal pleasure' that they believe exists *somewhere* just out of reach, without interrogating the presuppositions that power this form of suffering.

Is There an Ethics of Chemsex?

In his seminar on ethics, Lacan (1997) argues against ethical programmes that seek to maximise the 'Good', however defined, and minimise harm. 'The service of Goods', as Lacan calls it, will always rest on a normative framing of what a given authority determines is socially Good. The subject's attempt to conform to this alienating Good will be derailed by the superego and descend into a cycle of guilt and transgression. It is difficult to think of a form of ethics that does not ultimately rely on some notion of the Good.

Given its amoral and potentially destructive character, it may be surprising at first glance that Lacan aligns the drive with an alternative form of ethics. Lacan proposes a model of ethics rooted in the drive's refusal to obey the wishes of the ego, and its indifference to illusory and ideological promises of deferred gratification or fullness.

As Zupančič (2011) elaborates, Lacanian ethics poses the question: 'Will I act in conformity to what threw me "out of joint", will I be ready to reformulate what has hitherto been the foundation of my existence?' (p. 235).

As we have seen, although the field of critical chemsex studies makes interesting observations about forms of sociality generated or facilitated by chemsex, it falters in its ethical valorisation of the practice when does not account for participants' problematic or ambivalent relationship to chemsex, and when it fails to interrogate the superegoic nature of fantasies of unlimited enjoyment. Psychoanalytic queer theorists have instead offered an ethics grounded in the idea that 'risky' sex, through its alignment with the death drive, may facilitate a transformative openness towards the unconscious and otherness. ('Cruising . . . involves not just hunting for sex but opening oneself to the world', writes Dean (2009: 210).) While this also makes interesting food for thought, it seems to idealise the subjective motivations involved in such sex, which can often be very goal-oriented (seeking the 'right' kind of fuck) and rarely indifferent to the attributes of the other, even if traditional standards as loosened. More saliently, in its effort to link queer sex, ethics and the death drive, it runs the risk of misapprehending the struggle with jouissance characteristic of all sex.

Another way we might attempt to bypass the 'service of Goods' and bring Lacan's ethics of the drive to bear upon chemsex is through the problem of failed enjoyment that we have been exploring. As we have seen, one allure of chemsex involves the promise of an always-unreachable fullness of jouissance. The subject's responses to this illusory potential – through the 'dose-ification of jouissance' or otherwise – can provoke a crisis of enjoyment, requiring the reconsideration of how one chooses to enjoy. In particular, the *failures* involved in chemsex – those moments when it clearly fails to deliver anticipated satisfaction, whether because of something going 'wrong' or because it has too greatly undermined one's other sources of meaning in life – can confront the subject with the limitations built into jouissance, and the particular way one has unconsciously chosen to cope with these limits (in Lacanian parlance, one's symptomatic solution to symbolic castration). In other words, the repetition of the *inadequate* pleasures of chemsex may, in the final analysis, put the subject face to face with his drive.

One of the aims of clinical psychoanalysis is to help the patient claim ownership over and, in a less tortured way, 'enjoy' his drive (see Fink, 1999: 205–217). It is often said in Lacanian circles that a patient seeks an analyst because his solution to symbolic castration has stopped working – he feels enslaved to his symptom, which is powered by drive. In part, this is because the symptom is entangled with the Other. Over the course of a lifetime the patient has generated a symptomatic way of reaping some satisfaction in life in the face of the limits he has encountered. In analysis, the patient examines the history of his relations with others as a way of unknotting what kind of big Other he has unconsciously constructed as the source of his dissatisfaction. This leads to a confrontation with one's own lack – the impossibility of full satisfaction, or the 'nothing', around which the drive circles. The hope is that, in so doing, the patient can gain a degree of agency from the Other over the way his drive operates, the way he enjoys. Rather than try to fill it with external objects or conformity to ideals, the subject can take responsibility for and claim the 'nothing' as his own. This is what Lacan (1997) meant when he said that the destructiveness of the death drive 'is also a will to create from zero, a will to begin again' (p. 212), *ex nihilo*. The repetition of the drive presents, paradoxically, both the source of enslavement to the symptom and the possibility of subjective renewal. Against the 'G O'clock' of attempted mastery over death, this is a temporality that reckons with the presence of the (death) drive within life.

What would this mean in relation to chemsex? *Nothing*, necessarily: there's no *inherent* ethical valence to the activity, at least psychoanalytically conceived. Chemsex is not 'good' or 'bad', but rather a particular, contemporary mode in which the human's struggle with pleasure takes place. For those who feel they suffer from their relationship to chemsex, which harm reduction strategies fail to resolve, our psychoanalytic framing may helpfully shift the focus from the external causes of one's dissatisfaction towards a more transformative reckoning with one's own contradictory and unfulfillable wishes.[4] Although this may seem like a moralistic approach ('*Deep down, you really want this bad thing*'), it is morally neutral: it is not that one wants something 'bad', but simply that one struggles with *wanting* – a universal problem for which we all form compromise solutions.

But even if our reading of Lacanian ethics hasn't led us to a revolutionary chemsexual vanguard, there may still be an ethical project at stake. As we have seen, chemsex provides a unique opportunity for individual and social inquiry into our relation to enjoyment. Such a process may loosen the grip of the superego and its demands to cultivate jouissance, freeing us from the consumerist fantasy that we can overcome all limits to enjoyment (see McGowan, 2016), and the compulsive behaviours we sometimes invent to cope with this impossibility. This, in turn, may clear space for us to discover what we might enjoy *through*, rather than beyond, our finitude. What else might compel us, which does not promise to fill or manage our lack, but exists or arises because of it? Perhaps another word for this – whatever its chemistry – is love.

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Notes

1. My focus is on 'chemsex' as a predominately cisgender, gay male subculture; I will therefore use masculine pronouns in my observations about the subjective implications of chemsex practices. For important work challenging masculinist and cis-normative representations of queer sexualised drug use, see Moyle et al. (2020) and Pienaar et al. (2020).
2. Lacan later develops a theory of 'feminine' jouissance which has a different, 'non-phallic' relationship to castration. Although I am not convinced this mode of jouissance is prominent within gay chemsex culture, Longstaff (2019) explores this possibility.
3. See, for example, Pollard et al. (2018), who discuss a conflictual yearning for intimacy on the chemsex scene.
4. Whether this reckoning might be accomplished outside the traditional frame of clinical psychoanalysis is an interesting question beyond the scope of this essay. Wanda Vrasti's (2023) fascinating zine *Junkie Drives* develops a Lacanian approach to drugs both inside and outside the clinic.

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