The Rhetorical Function of the Abj ect Body: Transgressive Corporeality in *Trainspotting*

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Rhetorical studies has long been concerned with the moral progress of the human. Critics have traditionally sought either to account for the successes of rhetors who unify and mobilize their audiences by appealing to shared moral virtues, or to condemn those who use rhetoric to lead audiences off the path of reason toward "harmful," "immoral" ends. This persistent fidelity to moral judgment and linear reason has produced a valuable critique of oppressive discourses as well as a much needed acknowledgment of dissident voices that otherwise might have been ignored.

However, this approach to rhetoric also produces a troublesome dilemma. On the one hand, it assigns to the critic the task of identifying the ways in which discourses either defend or resist moral norms, and, on the other, it does not require an interrogation of those norms and the underlying assumptions that gird them. Humanist critiques of both oppressive and subversive rhetorics often assume an a priori unity, or sameness, that oppressive discourse conceals and subversive discourse reveals.

In doing so, rhetorical critics perpetuate, however unintentionally, the acceptance of a view of moral norms as natural, universal phenomena. Similarly, as cultural theorist Elizabeth Grosz argues, our faith in rationality as the uncontested epistemological ground affords us a belief in knowledges that seemingly "do not distort, manipulate, or constrain their objects. Instead, they describe and/or explain them without loss or residue" (*Space* 27). Overwhelmingly, moral norms—in conjunction with an ideology that privileges rationality—obsures or denies a particular site of rhetorical forces that threaten the assumptions of the critic: the physical body. Could it be that the common rhetorical practice of "silencing" bodies—and thus denying them their rhetoricity—is linked to the challenge they pose to moral normativity? Indeed, might it be that the
difficult task of assimilating bodies into a moral discourse has prevented rhetoricians from encountering rhetoric as a posthumanist practice, a practice that, in a Nietzschean sense, questions the genealogy of moral norms rather than accepting and perpetuating them?

The discourse of morality and rationality appears to provide comfort to rhetorical critics, assuring us that we know what these norms are doing. But attending to the rhetorical force of bodies belies this sense of comfort since, as Spinoza has suggested, we do not even know what bodies can do. Furthermore, to the degree that bodies are sites of epistemological and ontological uncertainty, they are also sites of proliferation and experimentation. In short, bodies are a fertile ground for the rhetorical critic. If acknowledging our uncertainty in the face of the corporeal becomes a premise for engaging rhetoric, then we have made a crucial first step toward contesting the primacy of moral judgment that is so widespread in rhetorical studies.

A number of contemporary theorists have convincingly charged that this overemphasis on norms fails to adequately attend to the complexities of the physical body. Overwhelmingly, humanist rhetorics have tended to either ignore the body completely or conceptualize it as an unruly entity that must be forced to do the bidding of the rational, moral conscience. Furthermore, as Grosz suggests, the body historically has been conceived of as "a vehicle for the expression of an otherwise sealed and self-contained, incommunicable psyche. It is through the body that [people] . . . can receive, code, and translate the inputs of the "external" world" (Volatile 9). The result has been an under-thematized and thus universalized body that is treated as either inert or disordered. In an effort to illustrate the diversity of bodies and their politics, some critics have responded by advocating the inclusion of "other" bodies that traditionally have been excluded from the scholarly conversation. Yet, even this critical move—although it continues to produce compelling analyses—maintains the assumption that bodies are stable entities that the critic can adequately identify and categorize.

However, if we conceive of bodies as unstable, fragmented, or even dispersed across a field of discourses—in other words, as posthuman—as I do in this discussion, then we require a very different critical framework through which to account for their rhetorical force. A framework that attempts to engage bodies in all their complexity does not provide the critic with a set of morals or laws that can render bodies meaningful. Instead, it might require that we approach bodies as bodies—less as objects that need critical interpretation than as rhetorical sites that
have the capacity to transform and be transformed through the engagement. Toward this end, I will investigate the rhetoric of the posthuman bodies of heroin addicts in the 1996 film *Trainspotting.* The film epitomizes the permeable, fluctuating nature of the physical body and thus highlights the limitations of critical approaches grounded in moral judgment and linear reason.

More specifically, I will attempt to engage the bodies in *Trainspotting* on their own terms—not as inherently moral or immoral entities but as bodies in flux. The bodies in the film, when read rhetorically, illustrate a significant alternative to traditional conceptions of the body as stable and self-contained. I propose that the film calls for a critical approach that attends to bodies as products and producers of posthuman discourses. In what follows, I discuss how body fluids in the film illustrate the instability of corporeal limits as conceived by Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Then, I explore the effects of the film’s treatment of desire, rather than reason, as a governing principle. Finally, I conclude by drawing out what I see as some possible social and political implications of a reconfigured notion of corporeality. But first, let us look briefly at the critical reception of the film, inasmuch as responses to the film characterize the kind of moralizing judgment discussed thus far.

In 1996, Danny Boyle’s film adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s bestselling novel became the highest grossing British-made film in the United Kingdom in history (Callahan 39). Although other films have addressed the subject of heroin addiction, most have done so from a stance of such moral disdain that the characters became little more than caricatures of an addicted underclass that remains safely Other to mainstream film audiences. In contrast, *Trainspotting*, even though it portrays the desperation and horrors of drug addiction, never grants its audience the privilege of certain moral judgment. The film invites audiences to engage with its characters in their own world as they struggle between the desperate need and the (always temporary) satiation that characterizes life on heroin.

The theatrical release of *Trainspotting* came on the heels of a controversial trend in the fashion industry known as “heroin chic,” a trend that earned its name by popularizing images of thin, glassy-eyed models who were apparently strung-out in dirty bathrooms or cheap, dingy motels (see Harold). President Clinton even raised the issue in a widely reported address to magazine editors, charging that “the glorification of heroin” is not “creative. It’s destructive. It’s not beautiful. It is ugly. And this is not about art. It’s about life and death. And glorifying death is not good for any society” (“Clinton”). Henry Giroux describes the images associated
with heroin chic as nothing more than fodder for “cultural slumming”—that is, attitudes and actions in which well-to-do yuppies aestheticize the pain and suffering of underprivileged youths (“Heroin” 27).

Some critics have made similar claims about *Trainspotting*. One reviewer, for example, said the film belongs to an unoriginal, voyeuristic genre that caters to “an addiction to addiction-watching” (Kauffmann 38). Other critics dismiss the film and other such films as “mere slumfests for the bored upper classes, virtual petting zoos they can visit anytime they want to feel like they’re down with the kids” (Callahan 39). Despite the film’s graphic portrayal of self-depravation and misery that is at times difficult to watch, other critics charge that the film’s uncritical, even sympathetic portrayal of junkies overtly glamorizes heroin use. Although such arguments earnestly point to possible real world dangers of drug culture and the exploitation of its images, they remain mired in a discourse of the negative. They relegate the rhetorical critic to the (psycho)analytic position of searching for a lack—a lack of morals, a lack of health, a lack of life. Put another way, such arguments can only judge the film based on its failure to do something it presumably should do: adhere to moral norms.

A moral argument based on whether *Trainspotting* does or does not glamorize heroin use—and whether or not that is good or bad—neglects a compelling line of analysis: how the pervasive physicality of the film functions rhetorically. The filmmakers are clearly careful to illustrate both the pain and the pleasure of heroin use, but this evenhandedness seems less the rendering of a moral judgment than an investigation or even a meditation on the transgression of boundaries. Indeed, in an interview, director Danny Boyle says that the film is “about being a transgressor...It’s about doing something that everybody says will kill you—you will kill yourself. And the thing that nobody understands is, it’s not that you don’t hear that message, it’s just that it’s irrelevant. The film isn’t about heroin. It’s about an attitude, and that’s why we wanted the film to pulse, to pulse like you do in your twenties” (Callahan 39). This pulsing—or this incessant transgressing—that Boyle refers to provides a key metaphor for my discussion of corporeality in *Trainspotting*. A pulse is not characterized by stability or even an interplay between opposite forces. Rather, a pulse is a constant fluctuation, an interdependent relationship between systolic and diastolic movement. It is in this sense that I conceive of “transgression” not as an eradication or a crossing of boundaries, but as a reconfiguration that occurs through continual engagement and response. The pulse of this film is enacted, in part, by bodies connecting and expanding within an economy of fluids.
Body Fluids, Abject Bodies, and Identity

Julia Kristeva’s theoretical work on the concept of abjection has done much to trouble a humanist conception of the discrete, autonomous individual. According to the Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus, abjection means “a state of misery or degradation.” Kristeva develops this definition of the abject by arguing that the significance of abjection lies in its role as an operation through which we continually distinguish ourselves as individuals. She describes the abject as a “jettisoned object” that is “opposed to I” and is “radically excluded”; the abject “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1-2). For example, an image of the emaciated body of a person living with AIDS may evoke sympathy, or, in some cases, fear, but it also fulfills the role of abject, infected Other that enables the healthy to feel clean, vital, and even morally superior. Similarly, the starving bodies of third-world countries serve as boundaries or limits that contribute to this country’s sense of nationhood. According to this logic, American identity depends on what America precisely is not.

However, Kristeva indicates that such distinctions and the identities that depend on them are never final. She argues that the self depends on the abject to constitute its border, to be that which “lies outside, beyond the set” (2). But she also notes that “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2). In this sense, the abject Other never remains at the margins; it never remains stagnant, creating stable boundaries for the self. Kristeva thus introduces a dynamism into the concept of identity—a dynamism that depends on a subject’s ability to recognize and reject the abject—that gets articulated and rearticulated through the self’s interaction with an abject Other. In other words, the Cartesian “I” becomes destabilized to the extent that the humanist emphasis on the mind/body split has been sufficiently troubled with regard to how we construct or acquire a sense of self. Kristeva suggests an ontology that is grounded in relations to others rather than in the conscious mind.

Judith Butler links much of her work in Bodies That Matter to Kristeva’s consideration of the abject. Our self-identification, Butler argues, operates within what she calls an “exclusionary matrix” that creates subjects and necessitates a “simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (3). She argues, following Kristeva, that the abject “zone of uninhabitability” that defines the boundaries of the subject “will constitute that site of dreaded identi-
ification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life” (3). However, Butler advances Kristeva’s argument on a point that is crucial for this discussion of the abject bodies in *Trainspotting*. According to Butler, the “abjected outside...is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (3). Rather than reinforcing what I view as the binary of other/self or of abjection/vitality that is implicit in Kristeva’s argument, Butler argues that the abject constitutes an integral part of the vital subject, serving as a force of identity formation and reformation. Whereas Kristeva suggests a corporeal identity that is dynamic and unstable, Butler adds—through her observation that the abject is internal to the subject—a permeable quality.

Although Butler’s introduction of permeability is helpful, I want to offer an important caveat before continuing. Butler posits a conception of subjectivity that depends on a *repudiation* of abjection. As I have suggested and will explore further throughout this discussion, subjects in the film do not and cannot sufficiently negate the abject. Rather, the abject is integral to the pulsing—or, what William S. Burroughs might call a “constant state of kicking”—on which subjectivity depends (xvi).

A close reading of some key scenes in *Trainspotting* should elucidate the rhetorical force of abjection. Depictions of body fluids in the film illustrate the fluctuating, permeable corporeality that Butler describes. In the film, images abound of body fluids contaminating inappropriate spaces. Film critic Andrew O’Hagan notes that for the young characters “shiteing and pissing and fucking and bleeding and puking are big parts of their talk, they preoccupy Renton and his mates, and it is hardly ever superfluous” (7). In an early scene, our (abject) hero Mark Renton prepares for one of many attempts to kick his junk habit. Clearly experienced in the ritual of withdrawal, Renton barricades his flat by nailing boards across the doorway. To the upbeat tempo of Beethoven, he prescribes his method for detoxification: “one room which you will not leave” and “soothing music.” He methodically lines up his supplies on a shelf: “tomato soup (ten tins of), mushroom soup (eight tins of—for consumption cold), magnesia (milk of—one bottle), vitamins, bottled water, mouthwash, pornography.” Renton continues listing all of his provisions for detox in a detached voice-over monologue.

In keeping with the Cartesian Enlightenment tradition that remains so prevalent, Renton is clearly invested in the adage “mind over matter.” He assumes that through a strategy of willpower and organization, he will rein in his disorderly, addicted body. Indeed, as he neatly lines up three
pastel-colored buckets near his bed, he checks off a mental list: “one bucket for urine, one for feces, one for vomitus.” Renton expects that by containing his bodily wastes and maintaining the sanctity of his room as a place of recovery he can overcome his physical addiction. He neatly places on the shelf “one bottle of Valium, already procured from my mother, who is, in her own domestic and socially acceptable way, also a drug addict,” and he concludes: “Now I’m ready. All I need now is one final hit to soothe the pain while the Valium takes effect.” With “socially acceptable” drugs in hand, Renton is eager to start his transformation from abject junkie to healthy citizen. As he indicates, however, he needs “one final hit” of heroin to bridge the gap between addicted body and healthy body. The next scene reveals that Renton has torn down the boards from his door and is already on his way to score. His detoxification session has lasted all of fifteen minutes.

In his doomed attempt at detoxification, Renton acts on a common contemporary desire to compartmentalize, contain, and solidify the self through appropriate management of the body. As Kristeva makes clear, body fluids—feces, urine, vomit—serve as the abject Other to the self. They are what we must cast aside in order to live. She writes, “These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live” (3). She continues by asking the pertinent question: “How can I be without border?” (4). Indeed, as his desire to contain and categorize his bodily fluids in their appropriate receptacles reveals, Renton seems intent on verifying and solidifying the border that allows him to maintain his uncontaminated identity and even his life. In a later scene, however, Renton discovers that such boundaries, while elemental to his subjectivity, are hardly stable or external.

Renton leaves his dealer’s home after having his “one final hit” (in the form of rectal suppositories) to help him over his withdrawal symptoms. Because the suppositories have yet to dissolve, Renton is caught in the first stage of withdrawal, experiencing severe diarrhea. He hobbles desperately into a grungy pub bathroom and sits on what we are told is the “worst toilet in Scotland.” After a moment of noisy, pleasurable relief, Renton realizes that in his eagerness he has expelled the undissolved heroin suppositories along with the contents of his bowels. Desperate to find his “final fix,” he vainly searches the rancid toilet bowl with his hands. In what becomes a surreal, Pynchonesque scene, Renton forces his body into the toilet bowl, diving into the watery underworld beyond the
toilet where he retrieves the suppositories. Victorious, he emerges from the toilet like a newborn—wet, excited, panicked, and gasping for air.

A juxtaposition of these two scenes illustrates the futility of Renton's strategy to stabilize his identity through an orderly containment of his bodily fluids. Rather than successfully bridging the gap between his identity as an addict and his desired identity as a "socially acceptable" citizen, he finds himself temporarily in the fissure between identities. However, this momentary engagement with the gap forces Renton to respond. He encounters his corporeal boundaries; however, not by acknowledging their "otherness" or remoteness from himself, but by immersing himself in them. Indeed, as he learns in the "worst toilet in Scotland," Renton must dive head first into his own waste to encounter the abjectness of his very being.

What he discovers beyond the filthy toilet, however, is a pure, seemingly healthy body of water that does not annihilate but instead differentiates him. Confronting abjectness, in this context, does not lead to hopelessness and death, but to another version of vitality. Plunging into the filthy toilet becomes a kind of vile baptism that grants Renton a new relationship to his body—not one that re-creates him as a clean, ordered individual, but one that is characterized by both abjection and vitality. In his discussion of David Cronenberg's visceral films, Steven Shaviro points to the body's ability to trouble such polarities:

The polymorphousness of living tissue has the capacity to traverse all boundaries, to undo the rigidities of organic function and symbolic articulation. New arrangements of the flesh break down traditional binary oppositions between mind and matter, image and object, self and other, inside and outside, male and female, nature and culture, human and inhuman, organic and mechanical (129-30).

Similarly, Renton is unable to maintain a comfortable distinction between his body and what is seemingly external to it. He learns that the abject—in this case, his own feces—is not an unruly quality to be reined in by reason, as a Cartesian reading would require. Nor is it an external border against which he can identify himself as an autonomous subject, as Kristeva might suggest. On the contrary, as his immersion in his own waste shows, the abject is a permeable and local boundary that is always in flux. By forthrightly encountering his own corporeal limits and acknowledging his own contamination, Renton reconfigures himself over and over again.

While Renton's experience in the toilet represents an immersion of
the self in the abject, Spud, his aimless partner in addiction, enacts a kind of reversal of this process. After a long night drinking and a consequent failure to perform sexually, Spud wakes up alone in his girlfriend’s bed and discovers that his bowels emptied while he slept. Horrified, Spud reaches beneath the sheets, and then reveals his hand, now covered in his own viscous, runny feces. He lets out a confused, guttural groan of despair. In the next scene, Spud leans into the kitchen where his girlfriend and her family are eating breakfast. While holding the soiled sheet out of view, he admits sheepishly that he has “had a little accident.” His girlfriend’s mother, who assumes that he has merely wet the bed, gets up from the table and urges Spud to hand her the bedsheets. He refuses. In the middle of an insistent tug-of-war between Spud and the mother, the terrible contents of the sheet spray across the breakfast table and splatter the frozen faces of the family.

In this scene, Spud is understandably eager to keep his abjectness contained. He tries to keep private his unruly, unclean self, to keep it removed from the public space of the breakfast nook. Just as Renton deliberately attempts to contain his feces in its appropriately labeled bucket, Spud tries in vain to conceal his in the flimsy receptacle of the bedsheets. Spud’s waste violates the purity of the breakfast nook, which is normally a place of nourishment and, by extension, the sanctity of the most fundamental social unit, the family. In a sense, this scene exemplifies the futility of a conception of an ordered (social) body that is based on either banishing or resisting the abject. As the scene crudely illustrates, however, nourishment and vitality are indistinct from waste and abjection. Furthermore, as Grosz argues:

Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside... They affront a subject’s aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity. They attest to a certain irreducible “dirt” or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the “clean” and “proper.”... They assert the priority of the body over subjectivity. (Volatile 193-94; emphasis added)

As Grosz’s comments suggest, a concept of subjectivity that is based on purity and stability is impossible given the very nature of our bodies. Furthermore, as I will discuss in my concluding comments, such a notion of subjectivity perpetuates a discourse of “self” and “other” that has significant social and political implications.
It is important to note that subjectivity does not disappear in this model, but it is rendered in different and significant ways. The tension or the gap between selves is the productive force of identity. The bodies in *Trainspotting* are forced to recognize that order and disorder, abjectness and vitality, and even life and death are not distinguishable, opposing pairs between which one can choose; nor do they occupy opposite ends of a spectrum along which one progresses, becoming either more abject or more pure in the process. Indeed, Renton recognizes this non-linearity of the body. When his friend Sick Boy rants that Sean Connery and other British “has-beens” symbolize the fate of the living—a downward progression in quality ending in death—Renton is unwilling to accept such a fate. When advising Spud about how to behave in a job interview, Renton explicitly articulates his newfound outlook on life, warning that “It’s a tightrope, Spud. It’s a fuckin’ tightrope.”

In addition to functioning as abject boundaries, bodily fluids in the film also function as linkages. Bodies only mean by way of the assemblages they form with other bodies, drugs, tools, and so on. Fluids direct these connections within a pulsating, mutating network. For example, a closeup of Renton’s blood filling the chamber of a hypodermic needle as the amber-colored liquid heroin enters his veins depicts the exchange of one body fluid for another. What is usually considered an “outside” substance now becomes a part of the body, pulsing through addicted veins. This configuration of the body gains its meaning precisely through its relationship to heroin. The identity of the junkie and even of the physically addicted body result from exchanges made within a complex economy of fluids, money, and desires.

This exchange of fluids—or what Burroughs calls “an inoculation of death”—suggests that life and death do not constitute a binarism but rather a qualitative difference based on one’s continued exposure and response to the world. Heroin use in *Trainspotting*—as well as in Burroughs’ autobiographical novel *Junky*—simply magnifies this point. Burroughs makes this tension explicit when he writes, “A user is in continual state of shrinking and growing in his daily cycle of shot-need for shot completed” (xv-xvi). Here, heroin use exemplifies the tenuous struggle between vitality/abjection, pleasure/pain, satisfaction/need that constitutes life itself. As Burroughs muses, “Perhaps if a junky could keep himself in a constant state of kicking, he would live to a phenomenal age” (xvi). Again, if we imagine identity as a pulsing—or, as Burroughs suggests, a cycle of “shrinking and growing”—we see that abjection is as integral to the formation of the self as thriving vitality.
The tools utilized in the exchange of fluids also forge linkages of the body with what is external to it. The spoon and needle that deliver heroin to an addict’s veins, the soiled bedsheet that Spud vainly tries to keep private, and even the toilet through which Renton must force himself—all of these extend the body, push it to its limits, and, ultimately, render it somehow different from its previous state. Anthropologist Paul Schilder suggests that the incorporation of tools reformulates one’s body image as well as one’s interaction with the world: “[t]he body-image can shrink or expand; it can give parts to the outside world and can take other parts into itself” (202). For example, Schilder notes that when we take a stick in our hands and use it as a tool, it becomes a part of our skeletal system, extending the body into the world. Thus, the “tools” in *Trainspotting* do more than connect the body to the external world; in a sense, they become part of the body, much like other cultural products, such as eyeglasses, clothes, prosthetics, and piercings.

Furthermore, while body image is a rhetorical or psychological construct, Grosz astutely argues that it is no more so than the biological body:

> The body image is as much a function of the subject’s psychology and sociohistorical context as of anatomy. The limits or borders of the body image are not fixed by nature or confined to the anatomical “container,” the skin. The body image is extremely fluid and dynamic; its borders, edges, and contours are “osmotic”—they have the remarkable power of incorporating and expelling outside and inside in an ongoing interchange. (*Volatile* 79)

Grosz shows that this interchange of the body’s edges constitutes its power. Its very flexibility allows for the identity dependent on that body image to remain always in a state of tension and flux rather than a state of absolute stability.

The exchange of body fluids, Burroughs’ notion of a tension or “kicking,” and the extension of the body through tools—all these suggest a concept of corporeality that operates not on a linear trajectory that progresses toward predictable ends, but on a dispersed field of desire. Just as the perpetual encounter with abject corporeal limits reconfigures and challenges a humanist notion of the autonomous individual, I will show in the following section that *Trainspotting*’s exemplification of physical desire as a driving force offers an alternative to linear reasoning as a governing ontological principle.
The Logic of Desire

If identity is propelled at least in part by corporeal desire, then unruly bodies must be viewed as more than inferior to reason or as the constitutive borders of the self. Kristeva argues, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Although Kristeva’s concept of the abject remains grounded in its power to negate, her allusion to a disturbance of order is compelling. I argue that rather than undermining or escaping existing order and boundaries, the bodies in *Trainspotting* change their shape through an enactment of desire. Rather than an activity governed by reason, this non-teleological reshaping of subjectivity is propelled by desire—desire for pleasure, desire for connections, desire for movement. In this sense, the film illustrates the body’s resistance to traditional rationality.

Foucault’s early work on power and resistance may provide an effective way of looking at the rhetorical force of desire in this film. Foucault suggests that a resistant text does more than negate rational boundaries; it reconfigures them through a process of transgression. Resistance, or transgression, for Foucault, implies its own limits. Indeed, he explains that “limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows” (34). Thus, transgression requires for its force both a limit or boundary and a pushing of boundaries.

Following Foucault, I will suggest that transgression is a constant engagement with boundaries (for example, political, sexual, historical boundaries), an engagement that serves to destabilize what might otherwise appear to be stable, monolithic, epistemological, or ontological structures. However, it is important to note that transgression, unlike subversion, is never an absolute end in itself. Furthermore, although Foucault discusses transgression in terms of a crossing of boundaries, I suggest that we consider it more nearly as a reconfiguration of boundaries. For example, when Renton and Spud encounter their corporeal limits they do not escape their bodies; rather, they are introduced to new networks where they are forced to confront more limits and new configurations. Desire, in its transgressive form, then, does not affirm the Cartesian “either/or,” but instead enacts a kind of “and.” That is, the relationship is based not on exclusion, but on connections and practice.
Resistance in this model does not serve to subvert or negate dominant discourse; nor is it about judging deviant discourse from a place of moral certainty. Instead, it is about encountering, or even temporarily inhabiting, the space at the limits of understanding. Renton’s and Spud’s encounters with their own shit as well as the experience of shooting heroin enact a transgression of corporeal limits. This transgression should not necessarily be considered positive or negative, for it is the tension between boundary and what exceeds boundaries that is important. A significant driving force for this resistance is desire. While the desire that is represented in the film is certainly a desire for pleasure, it is also a desire to overcome the pain that inevitably attends a life lived on heroin.

Renton’s body is expanded and reconfigured not only through his desire for heroin but also through his desire to stop using it. At one point in the film, for example, he is compelled to kick his habit by a desire to regain his sexual potency. As one reviewer suggests, “He seems to want merely to exchange one pleasure for another, since the two don’t go together” (Cardullo 161). After a couple of days off heroin, Renton joins his friends at a disco. As he watches couples pairing off on the dance floor and in corners, Renton recognizes what he has been missing. This time his monologue is even more detached than when he prescribed his “cold turkey” method of detoxification. He now analyzes his condition in the third person: “heroin had robbed young Renton of his sex drive, but now it had returned with a vengeance. As the impotence of those days faded into memory, a grim desperation took hold of his sex-crazed mind. His pulse-jumped libido, fueled by alcohol and amphetamine, taunted remorselessly his own unsatisfied desire.” He concludes by voicing the punctuation that corresponds to his situation: “Dot. Dot. Dot.”

Again, the voice-over in this scene seems less to indicate Renton’s thoughts at the time than his reflections about a past event. Unlike the detoxification scene in which he talks through a process, using present tense and first-person pronouns, he now describes his desire as if he is reading from a tawdry romance novel. Simultaneously, he appears to be anything but a detached narrator. With only his hips pulsing to the music, his eyes dart desperately around the disco, scanning the scene hopefully for any and every woman who might notice him. Thus, his articulated ellipsis—“Dot. Dot. Dot.”—implies a gap or a fissure as well as a connection to be made. Renton is again in that space between identities, the tense space produced by desire that will inevitably propel him elsewhere. When Renton is finally invited home by Diane—a smart, beautiful, and, as he will learn, very young woman he meets outside the
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disco—he finds that with connection comes responsibility. Naked and eager for sex, Renton reluctantly agrees to Diane’s request that he wear a condom. Afterwards, when Diane throws Renton out of what he learns is a bedroom in her parents’ house, we see him in silhouette, standing in the hallway, dejectedly pulling off the condom with a loud snap before going to sleep on the couch.

In these scenes, Renton undergoes a transformation from an apathetic junkie to an active lover. Both configurations create their own kinds of connections and their own kinds of responsibilities. And both are governed by desire rather than reason. Later, his desire once again to overcome his junkie lifestyle lands Renton in London working as a real-estate broker. Both desires (for good or bad) produce a difference in Renton’s life. In this sense, desire functions differently from reason, which seeks to re-present sameness. Desire produces a tension or force that defies any teleological model, for if Renton were to follow a linear progression of ever-heightened drug euphoria, his body would inevitably break down and cease to function at all.

The fate of Renton’s boyhood friend Tommy illustrates the dangers of uncritically embracing linearity. Throughout the first half of the film, Tommy refuses to touch heroin. Unlike his drug-addicted friends, blonde and muscular Tommy has an active sex life with his steady girlfriend, lifts weights, and is unabashedly proud of his highland heritage. One afternoon, Tommy encourages his strung-out friends Renton, Spud, and Sick Boy to take a walk in the countryside. Admiring the view and breathing in the fresh air, he happily exclaims, “It’s the great outdoors! Doesn’t it make you proud to be Scottish?” Renton shouts in response, “It’s shite bein’ Scottish! We’re the lowest of the low!—the scum of the fuckin’ earth. The most wretched, miserable, servile, pathetic trash that was ever shat into civilization. Some people hate the English. I don’t. They’re just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonized by wankers. We can’t even find a decent culture to be colonized by!” Unlike Renton, who acknowledges Scotland’s complex role as abject Other to England, Tommy sees his world in black and white. This is evident in both his approach to Scotland and to drugs. For Tommy, either one is drug-free and healthy or addicted and sick. He initially rejects all drugs (except for the occasional pint) in order to preserve what he sees as his un tarnished vitality.

In the second part of the film, however, Tommy becomes desperate after losing his girlfriend. He begs Renton to let him try heroin. Tommy, however, does not seem to understand the “logic of need,” as Burroughs describes it, in which one maintains a constant state of kicking between
the desire for life on heroin and life off it. Instead, Tommy pursues heroin addiction with the same vigor and in the same way that he earlier pursued weightlifting, sex, or nationalism—as a teleological move toward a clear end. He is clearly motivated by a desire to replace the pleasures of sex with the pleasures of drugs, but Tommy approaches his desire as a lack to be filled and as a project to be completed. Tommy indulges in heroin as if to punish himself, as if abjection was an external Other—opposing his former vitality—through which he can escape himself and his misery. However, his quest illustrates that when pursued to its “reasonable” conclusion, abjection leads to obliteration. Tommy’s body deteriorates. He becomes infected with the AIDS virus and eventually dies alone in the midst of rubbish and cat feces and in a pool of his own vomit. For Tommy, body fluids are not an extension or a reconfiguration of vitality; they are the end of it.

Renton, Spud, and Sick Boy—unlike Tommy—have long rejected the traditional western narrative of health and progress. They have clearly dismissed the humanist model as anything other than a myth. Andrew O’Hagan notes that these characters “appear to have had enough debates, and theories, and choices, and fake opportunities. ‘It’s all shite. . . .’ Everything. Renton holds no allegiances, carries no banner, not even for himself. What he’s chosen instead is a ‘sincere and truthful junk habit’” (6). While we learn that Renton eventually finds his junk habit no more “sincere and truthful” than anything else, it does operate differently than the order he rejects.

In the film’s opening scene, Renton and the others gather in their favorite shooting gallery to take turns “cooking up” heroin fixes and injecting the fluid into each other’s arms. A camera slowly pans over Renton’s thin, emaciated body, pale face, and dark-ringed eyes as he exhales a gray cloud of cigarette smoke. His track-marked arm, constricted above the elbow by a makeshift tourniquet of surgical tubing, falls limply to his side. The low camera angle fixes the viewer’s gaze on Renton as he lies on the dingy floor. “Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family,” he says in his working-class Edinburgh burr, cataloging what he considers appropriate, if mediocre, middle-class choices:

Choose a fucking big television. . . . Choose sitting on the couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows. . . . Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats that you’ve spawned to replace yourselves. . . . But why would I want to do a thing like that? I
chose not to choose life. I chose somethin' else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?

Iggy Pop's song "Lust for Life"—which pairs an upbeat tempo with a lyric about drug addiction—serves as background for Renton's diatribe. The camera, still at ground-level, pans across the entrance to the shooting gallery. A friendly "Welcome to Mother Superior's" is scribbled on the wall, greeting guests as they enter the "establishment" of the neighborhood's most infamous junkie. Friends kiss and laugh as they debate the minute details of hometown hero Sean Connery's career. Renton reminds the audience, as his eyelids flutter back in ecstasy, that although the addict's life may not be governed by reason, it is ruled by its own kind of logic: "people think it's about desperation and misery and death and all that shite, which is not to be ignored, but what they forget is the pleasure of it. Otherwise, we wouldn't do it. After all, we're not stupid. At least, we're not that stupid." Although his defiance is compelling, we know from his subsequent failure to kick his habit that Renton's faith in his ability to decide for himself is as misguided as the vapid suburbanites he loathes.

It is important to note here that Renton's resistance to middle-class British values need not be seen as an attempt to subvert or overthrow those values. The transformations that Renton undergoes do not enact either an upward progression toward higher levels of pleasure, or a downward spiral toward deeper levels of abjection resulting in death. Instead, Renton enacts a transgression in that his resistance depends for its force on the very society he inhabits. Michael André Bernstein writes, "Abjection is only felt in conversation with another, with a voice, whether internal or external, whose oppressive confidence arises through its articulation of the normative values of society as a whole" (29). Furthermore, in an observation that is particularly relevant to our discussion of Renton, Bernstein argues, the "Abject Hero hears this voice as simultaneously more powerful and more tamed than his own; he encounters in it the judgment of a social order he fears and despises in equal measure, but against whose might he knows himself possessed of only the shabbiest ruses and most ignominious strategies" (29-30).

Renton's resistance only works in response to what he sees as oppressive and futile societal norms. These normative boundaries, however, need not be seen as something to be negated, as a subversive strategy would have it. Such a strategy remains faithful to a traditional inside/outside split, in which one must instigate a subversion from an exterior
location in order to successfully negate. As Foucault has shown, this is impossible. Instead of merely something to abolish, boundaries can serve as something to be pushed, and redefined, in order to reshape public space and redirect political momentum.

Similarly, Renton’s various bodily configurations—addicted, recovered, impotent, sexually active—do not occur in a vacuum, nor do they spin into such chaos that his body breaks down altogether. They are necessarily situated within a network of forces. Renton’s identity cannot be read as a progression from sickness to wellness, or vice versa. Instead, his identity is always being influenced by and is influencing the world. Again, his ontology can be seen as an eternal linking up, or fluctuation, rather than a teleology.

As he learns in his ironic baptism in the toilet, the abject—or the constitutive limits of his own body—as well as the vital exist simultaneously within him. However, his corporeal transgression or his becoming Other to himself is driven not by reason but by desire. And desire, as Burroughs has argued, does constitute a kind of logic: “Junk sickness is the reverse side of junk kick. The kick of junk is that you have to have it. . . . The kick of junk is living under junk conditions” (97). Accordingly, let us read desire in *Trainspotting* not only as a desire for heroin, but also as a desire to escape it and ultimately as a desire for the tension it provides.

Like trainspotting—the pointless British hobby of documenting the arrivals and departures of trains—living under the “junk conditions” of constant desire does provide a governing structure for those who have rejected all others. Indeed, the film’s characters spend much of their time aimlessly listing things (drugs, diseases, Sean Connery films) in order to, as Boyle suggests, “try to get a fix on the world. . . . You can’t get a grip on the world cause it’s spiralling, escalating out of control. So you do it through small things” (qtd. in O’Hagan 11). These seemingly futile attempts to order one’s world express both the insufficiency of linear reason and the ironic desire for their own, however hollow, structure. But perhaps these efforts are only hollow when judged by standards of reason. The characters do gain a certain pleasure from such activities, a pleasure that is governed by a logic of sorts—or what Burroughs calls “the algebra of need.” Heroin, he says, is “a cellular equation that teaches the user facts of general validity.” He notes that using junk has taught him much about life: “I experienced the agonizing deprivation of junk sickness, and the pleasure of relief when junk-thirsty cells drank from the needle. Perhaps all pleasure is relief. . . . I have learned the junk equation. Junk is not, like alcohol or weed, a means to increased enjoyment of life. Junk is not a kick.
It is a way of life” (xvi). While my argument does tend to reinforce a binarism between desire and reason, heroin use, as exemplified in *Trainspotting*, reintroduces desire as an important, though long overlooked, ontological force.

**Implications for the Body Politic**

The body politic that has emerged out of liberal humanism is, in large part, disciplined by a politics of the body. Legal and punitive systems, national identity construction, even the market—all operate by determining the resources allocated to or denied to real bodies. Understandably, resistance to the oppressive effects of power in this paradigm has depended on coalitions of people banding together based on some perceived bodily sameness. Groups of “same” gender, race, class, or sexual preference, for example, have all made significant headway in fighting the oppression they suffer. This kind of identity politics is based on three significant assumptions. First, as I have already noted, it depends on a concept of an essential, stable sameness between bodies that can serve as a unifier for political action. Second, it grounds its political strategies on an assumption that power resides at the top of a hierarchical structure that must be dismantled in order to emancipate these oppressed bodies. Third, advocates of identity politics, like the traditional models to which they respond, often implicitly assume that corporeality involves a linear progression of increasing abjection that culminates in death.

The unstable identities enacted by the characters in *Trainspotting* trouble a notion of politics based on sameness—albeit in an exaggerated way. This is done, in part, through an enactment of desires. Feminist theorist Carla Freccero investigates texts that introduce corporeal pleasure onto the political stage. Her observations lend insight to our discussion of corporeality in *Trainspotting*:

> perhaps, through the political movements that have adopted the erotic as their domain of struggle, a further resistive pleasure can be discovered and reclaimed: a leap of imagination that undoes the individualistic conception of the body as bounded and prohibited from the exchange of bodily fluids with others; instead of this notion, the discovery of pleasure as sociality, bodies and pleasures connected and exchanged. Not only then the politics of pleasures, but the pleasures of politics as well. (80)

Freccero suggests that body fluids disperse bodies through connections and exchanges with others and, in doing so, complicate a politics based on individuality. Similarly, the bodies in *Trainspotting* are con-
stantly mutating and becoming something different, disallowing a political order that depends on their stability. Furthermore, a politics based on sameness is necessarily based on exclusion. Indeed, in strategizing a response to unfair power dynamics, theorists of both queer identity and racial identity have posed theoretical questions about who qualifies as "gay" in a gay rights organization and who counts as "black enough" to head the NAACP. This line of questioning reflects a tension in which theorists want to resist reinscribing the very political structures they see as oppressive. Freccero, writing specifically about popular erotic rhetorics, advocates a useful conception of body politics that would "render problematic the notions of sexual identity, sexual choice, the meaning of pleasure and consent" because these sites contain no "truths" that one can then reveal or authenticate. Her goal, instead, is to "encourage ways of enhancing and supporting the unruliness of taboo bodies, while at the same time teasing out their contradictions" (75).

Similarly, Judith Butler, like many feminist theorists before her, questions the validity of a movement that necessitates an essential, universal womanhood as its political ground. The notion of corporeality suggested by Butler, and rehearsed in *Trainspotting*, suggests that although "the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation" (4). Butler argues that groups mobilizing around issues of identity might consider that "collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern" (4). In this sense, the abject vitality enacted in *Trainspotting* indicates the power of a subjectivity grounded in utter difference.

In *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*, Jeffrey Nealon offers a compelling analysis that foregrounds the ethical imperative of honoring difference. He suggests that any notion of identity must begin with an acknowledgment that it is necessarily socially situated and thus inextricable from other identities. Nealon explains that rather than attempting to "thematisize the other in terms of its similarities with the self, [he is] interested here in constructing an ethical *alterity politics* that considers identity as beholden and responsive first and foremost to the other" (2). The obligation to the Other, according to Nealon, rejects purity and sameness as foundational standards for rhetoric. Instead, this obligation requires an engagement with Others on their own specific and unpredictable terms.
By foregrounding the abject, *Trainspotting* temporarily destabilizes a notion of subjectivity that depends on the abject’s otherness. Clearly, what is considered abject changes over time. As one type of abject body is allowed to openly inhabit public space, another pushes at the borders, forcing yet another temporary fissure. This dynamism, rather than revealing a weakness, is a necessary part of the political economy. In a discussion of abjection, cultural theorist Helen Molesworth argues that “I don’t think recuperation is such a problem for contemporary artists and critics. We know that all cultural production is equally and ultimately available for such a fate. It seems to me the best that can be hoped for is that such work, abject or *informe*, might point to some transgressive place or practice—in a way that might, however momentarily, disturb the status quo” (see “Politics of the Signifier” 21). In the case of *Trainspotting*, just as we think Renton has successfully kicked his junk habit, in the last scene he wanders off to Amsterdam, one of Europe’s most infamous drug trading posts. Renton actively seeks out the abject in spite of (and, perhaps, because of) his previous experiences with it. In the final moment, he is sober and presumably rational. Yet, he will persistently pursue the elusive “one final hit”—transgressing, mutating, and pulsing as he goes.

*Trainspotting* accentuates the transgressive force of the physical body: The body explicitly exceeds the confines of autonomous subjectivity, rational argument, and moral judgment because it is continually mutating through its relationship with outside contaminants (other bodies, technology, food, and so on). By viscerally confronting their own abjection (feces, vomit, drug-dependent blood), the film’s characters illustrate the impossibility of doing otherwise. Denying the abject inevitably fails. More importantly, the attempt to eradicate reminders of our own abjectness and inherent differences from each other often leads to violent results.

As the filmmakers remind us, they sought to create characters that were not easily dismissed as subhuman junkies, but would be taken seriously as all-too-human blokes struggling with the needs of their bodies. In a comment on *Trainspotting* aired on the Independent Film Channel, director Danny Boyle emphasizes that while ignoring the problem of heroin addiction is not helpful, neither is condemning it as a simple, downward trajectory:

Unlike the conventional picture of heroin, which is supposedly ‘you touch it, you’re hooked forever, and then you die’... in fact often people have an on again off again relationship with it... And that’s uncomfor-
able because it doesn’t fit the pattern of the government adverts, which use fear really. Because it’s actually a much more complicated issue and drug than that and they just fit all the people with parents [sic] so they can make themselves feel better, feel like they’re doing something about the problem. You have to speak the truth as much as you can and even if that involves uncomfortable ideas sometimes, which I’m afraid the film is full of.

This discomfort comes in part from the film’s refusal to afford its audience (or its critics) a safe, distant position from which to view the characters. The fact that the characters struggle with their abject desires does not necessarily inspire pity or judgment but forces the inclusion of those desires. The film thus calls into question a world view that protects itself by casting the abject as the price those other people pay for failing to make reasonable choices. The abject, addicted body configures the body—and life itself—as a pulse or a tension between need and satiation that forever propel it elsewhere. Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” is thus reconfigured as “(I) desire, therefore (I) become.”

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Notes

1. A version of this essay was presented at the National Communication Association, Chicago, 1999. I want to acknowledge Marco Abel, Kevin DeLuca, Gina Ercolini, J. Michael Hogan, Richard Doyle, John Muckelbauer, and Debra Hawhee for valuable feedback on various drafts of this essay.

2. See, for example, The Man with the Golden Arm (1955) and The Panic in Needle Park (1975).

3. My comparison of heroin chic and Trainspotting is not an unproblematic one. Although popular critiques of the two are similar, it is important to note that Giroux denounces heroin chic but praises Trainspotting for depicting “the horrors of addiction, withdrawal, and indiscriminate violence” (Channel 57).

4. After having obtained his final hit in the form of rectal suppositories, Renton sarcastically remarks: “For all the good they’ve done me, I might as well have shoved ‘em up my arse.”

5. Although the film makes Renton’s intentions seem ambiguous, Welsh’s novel clearly indicates that he is headed for Amsterdam.
Works Cited


