Artificial Paradise Revisited

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ABSTRACT: Following the economic theory of addiction the paper takes addiction not to be the exception to the rule but rather the paradigm of life. Unsteady equilibrium, adjacent complementarity, and hyperbolic discounting identified by economic theory as the conditions for addiction to develop are at the same time tantamount to a preference for the present as the future becomes more and more uncertain. The paper starts from Charles Baudelaire’s observations on artificial paradises produced by the intake of opium and hashish and looks at what reasons Baudelaire lists to both be acquainted with drugs and to refrain from them. A culture of gambling is described as a way to keep in touch with the fascination for addiction without actually falling for it. Modern culture is seen to be a culture of artifice, which for any of us is difficult to tell apart from a culture addicted to itself.

1. A Preference for the Present

A culture combines decoupling and re-embedding. Culture is therefore the answer to Harrison C. White’s search for a calculus of ambage, ambiguity, and contingency (White 1992: 112). The calculus is real, not just a model. A culture produces itself, often at some surprise to its members, out of its differentiation within a society. As Yuri M. Lotman would have it (Lotman 2001), a culture in its smallest element as in its grand design brings together, explores, and exploits two, that is at least two, incompatible yet inseparable languages that do not code reality but produce meaning through mutual interaction. They constitute a trope, a complex, a form – where ‘trope’ in rhetoric means the turns and twists given to, embedded within, and closing up a discourse or way of life (Lotman 2001), ‘complex’ in mathematics a pair of numbers, spaces, or functions not resuming within, but needing, each other (Stillwell 2002: 383/4), and ‘form’ in systems theory a mark in relation to its unmarked space (Spencer-Brown 2008).
An example of such a culture is Charles Baudelaire’s *paradis artificiel*, which he experienced and analyzed for a good part of his life and described in an eponymous essay published in 1860 (Baudelaire 2000). An artificial paradise is produced by taking a drug such as opium, hashish, or even wine, which brings on the experience of *kief*, at the cost of hallucinations, fatigue, and loss of will. But *kief* appears to be worth it, since it is a state of heightened awareness of the situation the individual is in, and of the self the individual brings to this situation. If ever there was a possibility for the self-evident self-consciousness so precious to the modern individual, it becomes real in those moments of complete calm and clarity experienced at the zenith of the intoxication (*ivresse*). Subjectivity and objectivity blend and the individual is closest to himself while not just sensing but in fact seeming 10 be, to instantiate the world around him. Moreover, it is not just the states of the individual and the world that become interrelated but the process establishing the relation that becomes evident and self-consuming: “(...) vous vous sentirez vous évaporant, et vous attribuerez à votre pipe (dans laquelle vous vous sentez accroupi et ramassé comme le tabac), l’étrange faculté de *vous fumer*” (Baudelaire 2000: 123).

To give the moment of calm and clarity its Arabic name ‘*kief*’ is revealing, because this word denotes both the state of mind entered by the drug taker and the resin glands of cannabis used to bring forth this state. A culture needs both a technique applied to states of the world, and the agent within the state being changed by the technique. Taken together, they define the trope, the complex, the form, which are real as operations or ‘practices’ combining symbol with strategy (Swidler 1986; White 2008: 373/4). Note that ‘symbol’ and ‘strategy’ are concepts which again denote separate units coming together without ever merging. A ‘symbol’, as Peirce uses the term (Peirce 1983: 64–6), brings together an object, a sign, and an interpretant, thus demanding and defining a whole pragmatic. And a ‘strategy’, using Jensen’s term (Jensen 1998), refers to actions that know about the complexity of the boundary that separates this action from its environment. Both symbol and strategy, the former in discourse, the latter in action, are further ‘forms’ indicating marks within their unmarked state that either gain their value as practices accomplished by observers reflecting their own precarious state or dissolve within this unmarked state.

This paper proposes another look at Baudelaire’s artificial paradise because its description by the poet may amount to one of the most reflective tropes ever to denote states of culture the very fascination of which stems from an artificiality, a deliberate practice and technique, which in gaining a most evident reality slowly but surely blights it. This gives us ‘paradox’ as the most general term for all fig-