



# I'M SO SAD, I'M SO FUCKED UP

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“A repetition of the compulsion to masturbate” is how Sigmund Freud interpreted Fyodor Dostoevsky’s addiction to gambling in a 1928 essay on the author who, the analyst later admitted, he did “not really like.” For Freud, “the unsuccessful struggles to break the habit and opportunities” gambling “affords for self-punishment” amounts to a bad case of guilt. This is not because of Dostoevsky’s deep religious faith, as other biographical critics might have it, but a repressed thirst for maternal reproach and reconciliation: the Oedipal “wish that his mother should herself initiate him into sexual life in order to save him from the dreaded injuries caused by masturbation.” The “obsession for play” gave “tangible shape” to Dostoevsky’s guilt “as a burden of debt” which the novelist excused as a pretext to be able to pay his creditors and return, from exile, to Russia without danger of imprisonment. Behind every thrill is the threat of oblivion, and even Dostoevsky’s losses brought a perverse sting of masochistic pleasure; when he and his wife were reduced “to the direst need, he derived a second pathological satisfaction from that.”

Developing the idea further in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud identifies guilt as the expression “of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death,” a byproduct of civilization whose surplus defines modernity. He warns of an “increase of the sense of guilt, which will perhaps reach heights that the individual finds hard to tolerate,” a hypothesis Hannah Arendt would seem to confirm in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, calling loneliness, a historical alienation guilt hastens to reinforce, “the common ground for terror.” Not a decade before his own escape from Nazism, Freud understood that “Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety.” Were we not so eager to destroy ourselves, individually and as a collective, maybe we would not be so sad. But because we are, Freud explains, the guilt lingers, festering no matter what we do.

In *Uncut Gems*, Josh and Benny Safdie’s fifth narrative feature, the most palpable illustration of guilt as the ambivalence between love and death comes at the end of the film’s second act. After Howard Ratner (Adam Sandler) unwisely persuades his father-in-law (Judd Hirsch) to outbid Boston Celtic Kevin Garnett (himself) for the Ethiopian black opal Howard put to auction, he returns to his Diamond District showroom bloody from the henchmen hired by Arno (Eric Bogosian), his loan shark brother-in-law, whom Howard owes six figures that he

would have been able to pay back had he not declined Garnett's initial offer of \$175,000, instead overvaluing the gem at a million dollars. Cradling the stone as his recently estranged mistress Julia (Julia Fox) attempts to comfort him, Howard begins to cry: "Don't look at me, please, I don't know what I'm thinking. I don't know what everybody is . . . It's not ever going right. I'm so sad, I'm so fucked up." It's an inevitable crack-up for Howard, whom the audience has seen maintain relative composure through ninety minutes of verbal and physical altercations with employees and business partners, bookies and thugs, family members and celebrities, from a nightclub quarrel with The Weeknd to getting locked—naked—in the trunk of his own car during a performance of his daughter's school play. At his debtors' last straw on Passover weekend, Howard has no recourse but to reconcile with Julia, who wears a crucifix around her neck, and asks him to unzip her skirt: "Howie," her tattoo reads beneath its bandage, to which he can only respond, "You can't even get buried with me now."

"Two traits are essential in a criminal," Freud writes: "boundless egoism and a strong destructive urge." Moments later, Garnett's assistant calls to inform Howard that the offer still stands, which could bring an end to his woes were his vice not so crippling. The transaction complete, Arno and his goons descend on the showroom as Garnett, in the back room, questions the morality of paying giving "some niggas in Ethiopia "a hundred grand for something you thought was worth a million dollars." Garnett's charge launches Howard into an impassioned defense of his own speculation in which, through the deluded logic of the capitalist and the addict, he convinces himself to bet the money bet on the Celtics' championship game. "This is how I win," Howard says to Garnett, ironically foreshadowing his own death in contempt of the mob.

The Safdies use subtle cues to explicitly link their saga of conspicuous consumption with the history of capitalism and its apocalyptic endgame. The film opens as the Beta Israel miners of Ethiopia's Welo Province revolt against their Chinese employers in 2010; one laborer's shin has split open, exposing broken bone, as two others clandestinely uncover the opal that will later be smuggled to New York inside of a fish, but as the camera closes in, the psychedelic photomicrography slowly transforms from the gemological to the scatological, zooming out to register as footage from Howard's colonoscopy such that the protagonist is introduced by means of a pain so far up his ass that it leads him to his death, benign though it may first appear. A history in montage of commodity fetishism intercuts prismatic reflections inspired by Eduard Gübelin's gem photography with black and white stills of indigenous laborers, colonial soldiers, and slaves, poverty, housing projects, and flashes from Garnett's own life that metaphorically—and then literally—shatter the glass of the display case on which he leans, against Howard's recommendation, convincing the power forward of the opal's "magic powers." When Howard tells him it's not for sale, Garnett asks incredulously, "Why the fuck would you show me something if I couldn't have it?" In the end, he gets the gem and wins the title, but not without some buyer's remorse.

In that moment, Garnett uncovers in his judgment of Howard an indictment of himself, though Howard's experience of guilt fails to extend beyond the concerns of his bourgeois station: thinking himself a winner, he dies with a smile on his face. The frame tightens on the bullet hole, oozing with blood, where the Safdies find the same iridescence as in the opal,

and the story ends where it began. Howard's tragedy is world-historical in scope: the precision of the film's period setting (2012) and ethnic signifiers (Jewish, African, Armenian, Mohegan, Shiksa) point to the allegorical role of his downfall, a fable for those who have tried to win a rigged game and lost, only to play again. All of the Safdies' films rely on suspenseful editing, cinematography, and sound design to depict holy fools breaking the laws of society in a misguided effort to uphold conventional pillars of family, romance, and caste, but the joy of watching them can be summed up by the title of their debut, *The Pleasure of Being Robbed*. The anxiety felt by the viewer of *Good Time*, *Daddy Longlegs*, or *Heaven Knows What* is the very phenomenon which proved to Freud the existence of Thanatos, the death drive, since the experience of pain as enjoyment in art necessitates "that there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind." The audience, like Howard, is unconsciously tempted toward annihilation; the antihero's charisma delicately masking a guilt shared on both sides of the screen until he meets his untimely fate and we, citizens of the twenty-first century, anxiously count down to our end, but not without some secondary satisfaction.

It would be too grotesque, too Freudian, to read a thriller about sports betting as a commentary on climate change, apocalypse, or the Anthropocene's imminent conclusion, but is there not a glint of Walter Benjamin's angel of history in Howard's transition lenses? Would the cinema of anxiety feel so on point were the demand for what Freud called "intoxicating media" to keep "misery at a distance" not so high? Howard exists in a milieu too willfully ignorant of the alliance between environmental collapse and the global rise of fascism to be innocent of enabling their perpetuation, a crime of which we all are guilty, pleasuring ourselves into self-hatred, as Howard does, peddling bedazzled Furby pendants that none of his customers want to buy.. Saving the world will take more love than Howard was able to give, but whether humanity is capable of unifying to overcome the ambivalence at our core is a question neither Freud nor the Safdie brothers claim the prescience to answer.

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*Uncut Gems*. Directed by Josh and Benny Safdie, performance by Adam Sandler, A24, 2019.

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