

***Beautiful Boy* (2018) — Temporal Privilege to Drug Addiction**

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Drug usage and overdose are pressing issues that the global society faces as one research estimates that about 5% of the population on earth uses drugs, and there were 585,000 deaths globally in 2017 due to drug overdose (Motyka & Al-Imam, 2021, p. 1). Adding onto the high availability of drugs such as cannabis, hashish, cocaine, and heroin, the stress associated with COVID-19 pandemic and higher exposure to mass culture, which indirectly and directly promote drug consumption, can further augment the number of drug users (p. 1-2). Feature films and series available online can affect people's drug perceptions both positively and negatively. *Breaking Bad* series (2008) portrays the main characters using methamphetamine, an illegal and highly addictive drug nicknamed crystal meth, and "has never had better marketing" (p. 5). In contrast, the film *Beautiful Boy* (2018) tells the real story of drug addicts on methamphetamine based on a true story detailed in two books; *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction* by David Sheff and *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines* by Nic Sheff. In one interview, Nic Sheff elaborates on the prejudices of drug addicts as "selfish hedonists" without investigating the very reason why one person might get into such trouble (Itzkof, 2018). The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the film *Beautiful boy* with the idea of deconstruction by the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). I got interested in this topic since I was surprised by the handiness of illegal drugs to youths in Europe during my exchange study experience in Brussels, Belgium. In doing so, this essay clarifies that the film itself challenges the binary opposition of the sober and the addicted by exploring the intimate father-son relationship of the main characters. The first part focuses on the description of the concept of deconstruction, mainly citing Jaques Derrida. Then, it will analyze the film *Beautiful Boy* (2018) using deconstruction perspectives after giving general information about the film and the typical portrayal in mass media of drug addiction and its effects on consumers.

The film *Beautiful Boy* was released in 2018 and directed by Felix van Groeningen. It stars actors such as Steve Carell, Timothée Chalamet, and Maura Tierney and won awards at the Chicago International Film Festival and Hollywood Film Awards. The film was also nominated at numerous film awards and festivals, including Toronto International Film

Festival. The film plot is based on two books, *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction* by David Sheff and *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines* by Nic Sheff. The characteristics of this film lie in the story's authenticity and how it portrays, without hesitation, blame, embarrassment, and fear of repeating relapse of drug overdose and the reality that neither the addicted nor the people around the person are ready to handle the consequent situation and their reactions to it (Lee, 2018). The film's key message is remarkably different from the often-seen glorification of drug usage in mass media. During one interview with Nic Sheff in *The New York Times*, "We have this image of kids who are getting high, having fun, and they don't care who it hurts," he commented. "Clearly this kid is not having fun. He's having trouble" (Itzkof, 2018). In other words, what we need to re-learn about drug addiction, perhaps, is the social and socio-economic factors that unfortunately realize the accessibility of highly addictive drugs to the youth and how drug addiction affects the sober who are around the addicted. Another interesting point of this film is that the main character Nic Sheff does not have apparent conditions that easily explain why he got addicted to crystal meth. According to Motyka & Al-Imam (2021), the common predictors of drug initiation are low parental support, upbringing in a family with unfavorable aspects such as violence, poverty, addictions, and peer influence, weak social support network and lack of knowledge of dangers of drug usage (p. 1-2). Except for the peer influence, at least from the film, the family of Nic Sheff seems to be both economically and culturally affluent, filled with care from his family members. Therefore, Nic's real story is evidence that everyone has the risk of getting into drug addiction, and such danger might be invisible yet is everywhere.

## DECONSTRUCTION—JAQUES DERRIDA

First of all, the concept of deconstruction developed by the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) is nearly impossible to define. Jacques Derrida states, "I often describe deconstruction as something which happens. It's not purely linguistic, involving a text or books. You can deconstruct gestures, choreography. That's why I enlarged the concept of the text" (Smith, 1998). If deconstruction is a process or a practice to reproduce rather than a clear concept to remember and read it out loud, it would be more effective to focus on how to "deconstruct" and demonstrate it with this essay.

The deconstruction concept is initially developed from structuralism, which shows that language representation is arbitrary, meaning that signifier and signified have no meaningful connections. Adding on to such ideas, Jacques Derrida indirectly proposed that meanings come from binary oppositions in his books, such as *Margins of Philosophy* (1982) and *Of*

*grammatology* (1976). Derrida stated that one of the two words of the binary gets to be privileged. For example, if the binary oppositions of women and men, homosexuality and sexuality, consciousness, and unconsciousness, Derrida's comprehension on structuralism will assert that men, heterosexuality, and consciousness are perceived as "better" or more "normal" in the conventional ways of thinking.

In order to understand Derrida's "deconstruction," it is crucial to understand another concept, "différance," a French word *différence* with the letter "e" replaced with "a." Différance is a vocabulary that Jaque Derrida made up to originally deconstruct the binary opposition of writing and speech or privilege of speech over writing. In the French language, the pronunciation for différance with "a" and différence with "e" have the exact same pronunciation, and they appear different only in writing. This shows one speech's dependent aspect on writing in a symbolic manner.

The purpose of deconstruction is to demonstrate that the binary opposition is not actually real or the boundaries of the binary are more blurred than they first appear to be. Rather, each side of the binary is dependent on the other side, which goes back to Derrida's own interpretation of structuralism.

Therefore, in order to deconstruct the binary opposition, it is first essential to identify the hierarchical relationship between two different words. Then, one should attempt to portray how the chosen words of a binary opposition are hierarchical. After that, one can temporarily privilege the underprivileged term of the two words and show that the privileged side of the binary gets its meaning and quality from the underprivileged and vice versa. In other words, this illustration of the binary realizes the hypothesis that "what if the opposite were the privileged?" Interestingly, after demonstrating so, one can recognize that the privileged terms are very intertwined so that they are no longer in the hierarchical relationship.

For example, queer theory often attempts to deconstruct the traditional hierarchical assumptions of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Historically, heterosexuality has been considered the "norm" and privileged as marriage is still illegal for homosexual couples in many parts of the world, and the all-gender bathroom is not so widespread.

Jaques Derrida frequently criticized logocentrism, which indicates the often-seen attachment of Western science and philosophy towards logos, such as the authority of consciousness and reason. This sense of authority creates legitimacy toward institutions and laws in society.

Based on the above interpretation of Derrida's deconstruction, the following parts of this essay dedicates to two research questions:

1. The already answered question: what is the possible binary opposition found in this film *Beautiful Boy* (2018)?
2. How does the film *Beautiful Boy* (2018) portray the binary opposition between the sober and the addicted?
3. How does the film *Beautiful Boy* (2018) temporarily privilege the traditionally underprivileged?

## REPRESENTATION OF DRUG USAGES IN MASS MEDIA

In order to understand how the film *Beautiful Boy* (2018) portrays the binary opposition between the addicted and the sober through the father-son relationships of the main characters, it is key to understand the general portrayal of drug consumption in mass media. The messages that mass media convey to the audience are symbolic, and the primary characteristic of mass culture is the indirect contact between the sender and the receiver of information (Motyka & Al-Imam, 2021, p. 2). Such a condition would often be different in new digital media or social media, such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Users of social media, not just media organizations, produce and share content on the platform. In responding to the content that other people have initially created, users can add personal interpretation to the original content. Also, as the platform personalizes content using artificial intelligence algorithms, people consume different sets of information on new digital media. Such technological developments enable disseminating unfiltered ideas to an unlimited number of audiences (p. 2). There are numerous examples of content and its senders on the internet that promote the usage of psychoactive drugs (pp. 2-3). When one starts using light substances, which have comparatively mild psychoactive impacts, such as marijuana, e-cigarettes and energy drinks, possibly influenced by media content, there are always risks that he/she will feel more familiar or feel the need to use more destructive drugs like heroin and cocaine (p. 2). The type of content that fosters drug consumption is various, and Motyka & Al-Imam (2021) especially discusses the effects of mass media, such as feature films, music, and fashion. The following elaborates upon films due to their relevance to this essay.

Motyka & Al-Imam (2021, pp. 3-4) argue that films containing scenes of drug consumption in films casually influence viewers' use of psychoactive drugs, and such films are increasing in number. Those scenes have "the potential to model behavior and convey normative propositions" on drug abuse (p. 4). In a study that observes the representations of drug consumption in Oscar-nominated films between 2008 and 2011, there were more than 500 scenes of drug use in the observed films and the authors of this study suppose that such

representation is an accurate behavior of the reality in the Western countries, where young people can easily experiment with psychoactive drugs (p. 5). Yet, the primary problem of these scenes is that they stimulate interest in drugs with aesthetic portrayals of the consumption (p. 5). Movies and series with scenes of drug usages are widely available on the internet via different digital streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Hulu, and, for example, *Breaking Bad* series (2008) portrays main characters using methamphetamine, an illegal and highly addictive drug nicknamed crystal meth, and “has never had better marketing” (p. 5). Briefly, the depiction of psychoactive drug consumption in mass media often influences viewers’ attitudes towards those drugs and their possible usages.

## FILM ANALYSIS

This section attempts to analyze the film *Beautiful Boy* (2018) from the perspective of deconstruction specified above. The film portrays a father and son who cope with the latter’s to crystal meth in a raw, authentic manner. It was too late to stop the addiction of the son Nic Sheff (Timothée Chalamet) when the dad David Sheff (Steve Carell) found out that his 18-year-old son had been experimenting with all kinds of psychoactive drugs available. The binary opposition particularly observed in this film is one between the sober and the addicted. To answer the second and third research questions, the following paragraphs analyze four scenes from the film and particularly focus on the development of the father-son relationship concerning changes in Nic’s methamphetamine addiction.



Image 1 (00:27:13)



The film portrays the binary opposition between the sober and the addicted by repeating Nic's sober and addicted conditions in a time-jumping manner. It also depicts the long-lasting close relationship between the father, David and the son Nic by including scenes when Nic was a healthy and happy child or an intelligent teenager. In the real-life story, Nic was an honor student in high school and co-captain of a swimming club at school (McGrath, 2008). Image 1 shows one scene where David and Nic unite and celebrate what they have gone through after Nic overcame the first phase of drug addiction and enrolled in a university. In order to cope with the first phase of drug addiction, Nic went through a rehabilitation program with support from his family. In most scenes where Nic is sober, they illustrate Nic's normal lives without addiction and his caring and seemingly both culturally and economically rich family. Such scenes have the values of calmness or normality in that the father-son relationship goes back to the original state of Nic's childhood. In other words, as so in reality, the sober is normal, and the addicted is abnormal in the film, and sobriety is something to get back when someone is ill in drug addiction.



Image 2 (00:35:35)

Image 2 is part of a scene where Nic and his father fight since Nick stole money from his brother to purchase additional drugs. This scene captures the conflict between the addicted and the sober, where they never agree with each other since they have clearly different goals. The father wants to take control of the situation somehow and help Nic stop using crystal meth.

At the same time, Nic depends so much on the drug that he does not concentrate on the discussion and eventually decides to leave the house after this argument with his father. By this time, the father is more and more mentally influenced by his drug addiction to Nic. As this film is based on a true story, David Sheff responds to The New York Times, reflecting on the moment when he realized that Nic has a drug addiction problem, that he had continued to ignore small issues and excuses that Nic had nuanced and that might have been hints for Nic's drug overdose (Maslin, 2008).



Image 3 (00:56:42)

Image 3 captures a moment from a scene where Nic is delivered by ambulance to a hospital in New York after relapsing the overdose of methamphetamine and calls his father David to a café. From the deconstruction point of view, this scene is one example of the attempts to privilege the traditionally underprivileged temporarily. Nic draws David, who is sober, to his vulnerability and confesses that he has reached the limit and feels tired. David can no longer feel angry or disappointed for this change from his beautiful child to the drug addict in front of him. David Sheff, again in real life, states that he could not accept the reality of his son's drug addiction and felt a solid resentment for it (McGrath, 2008). By trying hard to understand the situation, he became "addicted to his son's addiction, unable to stop torturing himself. What had he done wrong?" (McGrath, 2008). David gradually grew his understanding by shifting his thoughts from "how could he do this to the family, me and myself to understanding that he was



troubled and ill” (Itzkof, 2018). After doing so, he started to be able to “look at him with compassion and sadness instead of judgment and horror” (Itzkof, 2018).



Image 4 (1:46:51)

Another example of highlighting the relapse of drug usage is captured in image 4. Even though Nic is strongly encouraged to be recovered from drug addiction, he relapses again and loses consciousness in this scene. Lee (2018) writes that this film is a reminder that “relapse is part of recovery, a tough reminder that sobriety is not easily obtained.” Contrary to the often-seen drug representation on films, which do not negate drug usage if they do not arouse the interest for it to viewers, this film is different by telling a cruel and insupportable story of Nic Sheff, by shedding the exclusive spotlight on the disruptive reality of a drug addict. The director of this film, Mr. Dan Groeningen, says that Nic’s family’s unconditional love is “one of the reasons why Nic found his way out” (Itzkof, 2018).

In conclusion, this essay has drawn attention to the addicted-sober binary relations in the film *Beautiful Boy* (2018) and analyzed it using Derrida's deconstruction concept. After identifying the binary opposition, this essay has attempted to investigate how the film distinguishes such binaries by contrasting the father-son relationships of the main characters and the moments when the son is sober and relapses over and over. One of Derrida's tips is obscuring the binary opposition by temporarily privileging the conventionally underrepresented idea, the “addicted.” Not only how the film emphasizes the repeated failure of the son’s efforts

to get out of drug addiction, the whole theme of this film, in contrast to the ordinary yet problematic representation of drug consumption itself, is the act of deconstruction. In other words, by watching this film, many people almost experience what's like to be addicted to methamphetamine or at least to have someone addicted to it close to oneself, and they finally understand how much the addiction influences their lives and the boundaries between the addicted and the sober are more obscure than they have expected. In future research, I would like to employ deconstruction again to break down the conventional perceptions towards binary oppositions such as high and low culture, art and fashion, nature and culture, and developed and developing cities.

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