

Drugs in Cinema: Separating the Myths from Reality

Paul Iannicelli*

I. INTRODUCTION

American society has always had a conflicted attitude towards mood-altering drugs,¹ characterized by fear on the one hand and curiosity on the other. During different times, one attitude or the other – fear or curiosity – seems to predominate. Periods of tolerance and benign outlook are followed by periods of intolerance and determined efforts to “crack down” on drug use. During these periods of attacks on drug use, disparagement of the prior, more understanding period and a revival of myths and stereotypes about drugs and the people who use them invariably occurs. By employing these myths, it becomes easier to demonize the drug issue and win public support for more draconian measures. In order to exploit these myths, however, they must already be part of the public consciousness on some level. This paper will examine one of the two primary mechanisms behind the creation and perpetuation of these myths.

The origins of the modern myth are in popular news accounts, the first mechanism, with the press and broadcast media combining straight news stories with sensationalized accounts intended to command the reader or viewer’s attention. The second, and more interesting, mechanism is how these stories are woven into narratives by the purveyors of popular culture. Popular culture takes controversial subjects and uses them for its own purposes, in the best of circumstances to challenge the viewer (or reader or listener) to re-think his assumptions and question the status quo, but often just to be provocative for its own sake. Drugs are one such controversial subject which has proven to be a rich topic, for filmmakers in particular, precisely because they can be enticing, de-

* J.D., University of California at Los Angeles School of Law, 2001.

¹ The term “drugs” as used throughout this paper, refers exclusively to the group of mood-altering drugs, taken primarily for pleasurable rather than medical purposes.

spite being illegal and sometimes frightening. Unfortunately, in most instances, filmmakers have indulged in stereotyping and perpetuated inaccuracies about the causes and mechanisms underlying use and abuse of drugs. By doing so, movies about drugs and drug use have directly contributed to creating an atmosphere of confusion and misinformation which has made it more difficult for policymakers to create rational and reasonable drug policies. I think that by separating the “fact” from the fiction, a better understanding of drug use may emerge, which can serve as one element in the formation of better drug policy. In Part II, I set forth my reasons for examining this topic and the themes I have identified. Part III sketches a brief history of drug use in this country. Part IV examines the myths in detail by looking at early examples of drugs in film, and Part V considers modern counterparts to see if the myths have changed.

II. REASONS AND METHODOLOGY

A. Is Drug Policy Really Important?

The second half of the nineteenth century, as discussed in greater detail below, was a period of tolerance towards drug use, but it was followed by the view that psychoactive drugs were dangerous and needed to be controlled. This more repressive era began shortly after the turn of the century and lasted into the 1940s. In the post-War era, particularly the 1960s and 1970s, the public mood shifted again. Attitudes began to relax and drug use increased, peaking in the late 1970s.² This was followed by a very repressive era beginning in the 1980s, with Ronald Reagan declaring a “War on Drugs” and creating the Office of National Drug Policy (more popularly known as the office of the “drug czar”). The arrest rate for drug use tripled.³ Mandatory sentencing laws were adopted around the country and incarceration for drug-related offenses skyrocketed in both state and federal prisons.⁴ The annual budget requested for the Office of National Drug Control Policy for fiscal 2001 is enormous, nearly 20 billion dollars.⁵ These statistics – and there are many others – are dramatic evidence of the fact that drug

² See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Association (SAMHSA), 1999 SURVEY, available at <http://www.samhsa.gov>.

³ The arrest rate rose from 581,000 in 1980 to 1,584,000 in 1997. See United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Drugs and Crime Facts*, available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/dcf/contents.htm>.

⁴ Incarceration in state prisons rose from 19,000 offenders (6% of the prison population) to 237,600 (23% of the population). Federal incarceration increases were even more dramatic, from 4,900 (25% of the population) to 55,194 (60%). See *id.*

⁵ See OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY, NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL STRATEGY: FY 2001 BUDGET SUMMARY 7 (2000).

policy has a significant impact on American society. A significant percentage of the American public is under the control of the criminal justice system for drug-related reasons. Minority communities in particular have been disproportionately affected by this process. Billions of taxpayer dollars are being spent on this issue. Drugs are a major element of foreign policy, particularly with respect to countries south of the border.

There is some evidence that, upon the turn of the new century, public attitudes may be loosening again. Decriminalization of certain drugs, last proposed in the 1970s, seems to be cropping up again as a serious topic of discussion. New York is currently drastically overhauling its drug laws, under a Republican governor. Eight states, including California, have passed so-called “medical marijuana laws,” permitting seriously ill patients to legally use marijuana as pain medication. It appears we may be heading into another era of changed attitudes. The Supreme Court has just declared that states are not exempt from federal drug laws,⁶ but that is unlikely to be the final word on the subject. Rather, it seems likely that the battleground will soon move to Congress, and there are indications that opposition to a relaxation of some drug laws is not as staunch as it once was. If this is the case, there will be even wider public debate about the efficacy of current drug laws and a re-examination of attitudes about drug use. I think it is therefore timely to attempt to sort out some of the myths surrounding drugs that popular culture has fostered.

B. Why Look at Popular Culture?

Many, if not most, criminal laws have near universal support. There is little dispute that violent crimes, or crimes against property, should be punished through the criminal justice system. The specifics of how to punish and for how long are more complicated; they are generally determined by the complex interaction of political will and public perception. It is sometimes hard to determine whether the driving force is more political expediency or actual public resolve, but the public’s views are primarily influenced by the media and by popular culture outlets such as film, television, and music. This is even more true in the case of the so-called “victimless” crimes, such as drugs and prostitution. Unlike other transgressions, there isn’t even necessarily agreement that these *are* crimes. Things that sway public perception have an even greater impact on those issues, because public opinion is more malleable to begin with. Other studies have looked at how the news media

⁶ See *United States v. Oakland Cannabis Buyers’ Coop*, No. 00-151 (May 2001).

has helped shape opinion in these matters, but not a lot of attention has paid to the effect popular culture has had.

Drugs have been more or less taboo on television, but not in movie theaters, where they have been a primary or secondary theme in literally thousands of films. Most of these depictions, unfortunately, have distorted American's views of who uses drugs, why they do, and what the repercussions are. Because the media and popular culture play such a large role in this debate, these distortions have impeded the ability of policymakers to develop appropriate remedies. I believe any serious attempt to find solutions to drug-related problems in this country should look at the role popular culture has played in shaping those problems.⁷

C. How has Popular Culture Helped to Distort the Drug Issue?

Simply put, drugs are portrayed in films as a genuine threat to social order. I have been able to identify five themes that seem to appear consistently in films about drugs:

1. Racism and xenophobia, or "blame the other"
2. Urban/rural dichotomy: nostalgia for an agrarian past
3. The road to ruin: drugs lead to an uncontrollable downward spiral
4. Drugs are intertwined with unbridled and dangerous sexuality
5. Drugs are an indication of a wild and threatening younger generation

As evident from reading this list, each of these themes is based upon *broader* fears about societal trends. Drugs are used as narrative tools to amplify these fears, and thus become a focal point for attempts to control or reverse those broader trends. Parts IV and V will analyze specific examples of these trends, present in some of the earliest films about drugs up to and including very recent films. Obviously, not every film shares all of these themes. A few don't have any. But most films, past or present, capitalize upon several of these myths in order to tell their story.

⁷ To be clear, I don't mean to suggest that Hollywood has a *responsibility*, either on an individual or collective basis, to treat this issue in a certain way. Nor do I think that such a responsibility should be legislatively imposed in some fashion, as Congress is currently trying to do with regards to violence in film.

III. HISTORY OF DRUG USE

In order to trace the development of these five themes through the “first” repressive drug era of the early nineteenth century into the present, it is important to first understand the historical background against which these themes are set.

A. The Nineteenth Century: “A Dope Fiend’s Paradise”

Most people know that liquor, tobacco, and coffee all have very long and rich histories, dating back hundreds, even thousands of years. These substances, like illicit drugs, are all consumed for their mood-altering effect. For that reason, they too have been the subject of periodic disapproval and regulation that has waxed and waned over the years, depending on the time and place.⁸ Fewer people, perhaps, are aware that “illicit” drugs also have a long and interesting history. The use of opium as a soporific and general analgesic dates back at least to early Greek history, and references to it even occur in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁹ Andean cultures began chewing coca leaves to combat fatigue at thousand of years ago in South America.¹⁰ Chinese and Indian use of marijuana dates back to the B.C.’s and was well established in the Islamic world by 1000 A.D.¹¹

Opium use continued in Europe for centuries, and eventually migrated to the United States. By the early nineteenth century, doctors prescribed opium widely, to relieve pain but also to combat coughs, diarrhea, dysentery, and other diseases.¹² Opium imports rose considerably in the 1840s, but an understanding of its addictive properties did not begin to dawn until the time of the Civil War. By this time, however, patent medicines containing opium and alcohol were increasingly popular.¹³ These were sold in pharmacies, in general stores, by mail,

⁸ This regulation continues. Federal “prohibition” of alcohol ended less than seventy years ago; it didn’t come to a close in Mississippi until 1984! Tobacco, of course, has been under tremendous attack just in the past decade in this country. The parallels between these legal “drugs” and the illegal ones discussed herein are interesting to note but beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹ See John Scarborough, *The Opium Poppy in Hellenistic and Roman Medicine*, in ROY PORTER & MIKULAS TEICH, *DRUGS AND NARCOTICS IN HISTORY* 4 (1995).

¹⁰ See EDWARD B. BRECHER & EDS. OF CONSUMER REPORTS: LICIT AND ILLICIT DRUGS 269 (1972).

¹¹ See JEROME HIMMELSTEIN, *THE STRANGE CAREER OF MARIHUANA: POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY OF DRUG CONTROL POLICY IN AMERICA* 21 (1983).

¹² See BRECHER *supra* note 10, at 8.

¹³ See H. WAYNE MORGAN, *DRUGS IN AMERICA: A SOCIAL HISTORY, 1800-1980* 7 (1981).

and at traveling medicine shows. Interestingly, most of the customers for these “tonics” were women.¹⁴

Advances in chemistry in the nineteenth century played a role in bringing drugs into wider use as well. The chief alkaloid of opium was isolated and named after the Greek god of dreams, Morpheus.¹⁵ Hypodermic syringes were invented and, after successful use in war, began to be marketed directly to the public. By the late nineteenth century, heroin had been synthesized by the Bayer Company in Germany. Named for its supposed “heroic” properties in therapy, heroin was added to over-the-counter medications as well.¹⁶

Cocaine was first isolated from the coca leaf in the late nineteenth century as well. Like morphine and other alkaloids, cocaine is more potent than its parent coca and its effects more predictable. Doctors were happy to provide it to patients because the number of “nervous complaints” had risen significantly after the Civil War, so they were happy to provide new drugs that combated anxiety and depression.¹⁷ Cocaine soon was added to wines and to various tonic preparations as well.¹⁸

Even marijuana can be dated to this period.¹⁹ The *Pharmacopeia* first listed marijuana as a recognized medicine in 1850. Although it was not widely used, it was generally available, its effects were well known, and it was occasionally used recreationally.²⁰ brecher 409. In all, one scholar has described the United States in the nineteenth century as a “dope fiend’s paradise.”²¹

B. The Twentieth Century: Public Attitudes Begin to Change

Attitudes began to change, however, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Addiction was finally perceived as a significant problem,

¹⁴ See BRECHER, *supra* note 10, at 17 (“The extent to which alcohol-drinking by women was frowned upon may also have contributed to the excess of women among opiate users. Husbands drank alcohol in the saloon; wives took opium at home.”).

¹⁵ See James A. Inciardi, *Introduction: The Evolution of Drug Abuse in America* in HANDBOOK OF DRUG CONTROL IN THE UNITED STATES (James A. Inciardi ed., 1990), at 2.

¹⁶ See MORGAN, *supra* note 13, at 94.

¹⁷ See *id.* at 18.

¹⁸ The most famous of which, of course, is Coca-Cola, developed by an Atlanta pharmacist who manufactured coca wines. Coca-Cola obviously did not hide its main ingredients (the other being extract of kola nut, which provides caffeine), perhaps because it was initially intended to serve a medical market, albeit through a pleasant-tasting fountain drink. See JOSEPH SPILLANE, MODERN DRUG, MODERN MENACE 214 (1994).

¹⁹ In fact, presumably, the Jamestown settlers brought the plant with them to Virginia in 1611 and cultivated it for its fiber. Even George Washington grew hemp at Mt. Vernon. See BRECHER, *supra* note 10, at 403.

²⁰ See BRECHER, *supra* note 10, at 409.

²¹ See *id.* at 3.

and state laws that had been passed to limit the spread of drugs were perceived as ineffectual. Reformers and muckrakers pressured Congress into passing the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906 which, among other things, required labeling that accurately described the type and dose of drug contained within. Eight years later, the first significant anti-narcotics law was passed, the Harrison Act of 1914. That Act, however, did not ban the drugs, it merely required that anyone selling or prescribing narcotics pay an annual tax or license fee.²²

The dawn of the twentieth century also saw the birth of the new era of moving pictures. Given the familiarity with and interest in drugs at this point, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the earliest movies ever made was a kinescope produced by Thomas Edison's company in 1894 entitled *Chinese Opium Den*.²³

The brief history sketched above gives a general idea of the role of drug use in American society at the turn of the century. As legal reformers sought to redefine this role, the purveyors of popular culture sought to exploit it as well, although for different purposes.

IV. HOW MYTHS DEVELOP: EARLY EXAMPLES

Drugs were a popular subject in early film history. As the country moved into a repressive era with regard to drugs in the 1910s and 1920s, the people who sold and used drugs became convenient villains, or examples of problems in society that needed addressing. Rather than illuminate these problems, however, filmmakers used stock characters and exaggerated situations to make their points. I will discuss first a group of early "talkies" that illustrate that misperceptions about drug use were alive and well in the early days of popular culture.

A. Racism and Xenophobia: Blame the "Other"

One of the most predominant stereotypes regarding drugs is their association with specific racial groups. These stereotypes serve a "double duty": drugs are suspect because of their association with a particular minority group; that minority group is denigrated because of its association with drugs. The first racial group to suffer this stigma was Asians, particularly Chinese (all Asians were lumped together at the time as "Orientals"). Depictions of Asian characters were almost universally negative, not just in films about drugs, but in *all* films. This in large part sprang from their association with the opium trade. Chi-

²² See STEVEN R. BELENKO ED., *DRUGS AND DRUG POLICY IN AMERICA* 49 (2000).

²³ See MICHAEL STARKS, *COCAINE FIENDS AND REEFER MADNESS* 13 (1982). The first copyright for a film was granted earlier that same year, 1894. *Id.*

nese were portrayed as mysterious and untrustworthy. On one end of the spectrum lay Fu Manchu of the eponymously named series of the 1920s. Fu Manchu was an arch-criminal who was a stereotypical “inscrutable” Oriental. His vices included smoking opium and he numbered opium smuggling among his many criminal activities. In the 1932 *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, racist fears reached a high (low, really) point with Boris Karloff starring as the title character who schemes to kill white men and mate with white women. His headquarters were located behind an opium den. At the other end of the spectrum were Chinese laborers, the “coolies,” who were less threatening to the social order, but who still could not be trusted.²⁴

An excellent example of the early racist imagery in drug films is the 1932 film *Narcotic*, produced and directed by Dwaine Esper, who one film scholar has dubbed “America’s infamous evil genius of exploitation cinema.”²⁵ In this film, a well-respected doctor with a thriving practice encounters an old friend from medical school, Jin Lee. Lee embodies a typical portrayal from this period. His cold demeanor is unappealing and he always seen initially in shadow, his tall porkpie-style hat creating a menacing shadow. His style of speech consists exclusively of Confucian aphorisms, intended perhaps to emphasize his foreignness and an outlook at odds with Western ideals.

Jin Lee is fond of opium, naturally, but explains to the protagonist that the Oriental constitution is more “suited” to opium-smoking than is an American’s. Nonetheless, he tantalizes his friend with descriptions of the effects of opium, and the good doctor soon accompanies him to an opium den to try the drug for himself. Once “seduced,” the doctor is soon back for more, and he is hooked in short order. From that point on, his life quickly and completely unravels.

Of course, the reality of opium use was considerably more complicated. Opium smoking was introduced to the United States by the Chinese immigrants who were brought to this country in the 1850s and 1860s to build the cross-country railroads and work in mines.²⁶ These laborers gradually found their way to cities such as San Francisco, taking other low-wage jobs and establishing the earliest Chinatowns. Opium dens began to appear, generating negative publicity which an-

²⁴ Interestingly, D.W. Griffith, who has been criticized for decades for his positive portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in *Birth of a Nation*, was one of the only directors from this period to feature a sympathetic Chinese, opium-smoking character, namely, the man who saved Lillian Gish in 1919’s *Broken Blossoms*.

²⁵ JACK STEVENSON, *ADDICTED: THE MYTH AND MENACE OF DRUGS IN FILM* 11 (2000).

²⁶ See BRECHER, *supra* note 10, at 42.

gered local residents.²⁷ Of course, the hostility of local citizenry towards the most recent group of immigrants is a time-honored tradition in this country that continues to this day. At that time, it manifested itself both in periodic anti-Chinese riots as well as local ordinances that tried to control opium-smoking. Critics couldn't understand why white men and women could be seen smoking opium alongside these foreigners. They associated opium-smoking with a decadent and indolent Chinese civilization which seemed incompatible with the rapidly modernizing and work-oriented United States.²⁸

Despite attempts at control, the smoking of opium did become more popular during this time. However, less and less came from abroad (import was still legal, although taxed, until 1909) and more and more opium poppies were grown domestically, particularly in the South.²⁹ At the same time, opiates were being consumed regularly by means *other* than smoking. As mentioned above, they were sold over-the-counter by pharmacists and were prescribed by doctors. Women took them for "nervous disorders" and parents gave them to colicky children. This did not receive nearly as much negative publicity as the opium dens, however, because of the latter's association with the Chinese. Opiate abuse was a problem independent of the Chinese, but that did not diminish persecution of the Chinese. Instead, it helped lead to a nearly complete ban on immigration from China to the U.S.³⁰

Sadly, movies such as *Narcotic* kept these fears alive. By keeping attention focused on the Chinese as the group responsible for introducing drugs to innocent Americans, racial discord was perpetuated for several decades longer. Times change, of course, and eventually opium fell out of favor and was replaced by other drugs. However, the pattern of blaming the "other" for creating a drug problem reappears in many different ways, which shall be discussed later.

The Chinese were not the only ethnic group to be tainted by association with drugs. In the first decades of the century, cocaine became identified with African-Americans. This seems to be attributable to two reasons: one, that cocaine use was apparently prevalent in the South among contract laborers who used it to "keep themselves going" while at work, and two, that the reported external effects of cocaine, including unpredictable and aggressive behavior, played into already

²⁷ See MORGAN, *supra* note 13, at 35.

²⁸ See *id.* at 37.

²⁹ See BRECHER, *supra* note 10, at 44.

³⁰ See DAVID F. MUSTO, *THE AMERICAN DISEASE: ORIGINS OF NARCOTIC CONTROL* 3 (1973).

existing stereotypes of blacks.³¹ Reports circulated of blacks on cocaine committing crimes and then being nearly impervious to police bullets. As one commentator notes, the “myth that the drug increased the physical powers of criminals became national currency.”³² Fears that cocaine might increase sexual impulses played to another stereotype, and many rapes were reportedly traced to cocaine.

Mexicans would feel the brunt of the anti-immigrant sentiment as well. During the 1920s, Mexican immigration increased into the West and Southwest, primarily to fulfill the rising need for farm laborers. Employers welcomed the immigrants, but the Mexicans were also feared as a source of criminal and deviant social behavior.³³ By the mid 1920s, horrible crimes were being attributed to marijuana and its Mexican users. Medical studies were published, purporting to show that crime could be traced to marijuana use, because it was a sexual stimulant that removed civilized inhibitions.³⁴

Few films were made that exploited these particular stereotypes about African-Americans and Mexicans. This was not because of any improved social consciousness, but rather was due to the instituting of the Production Code, discussed *infra*, which effectively removed the portrayal of drugs from the silver screen for over two decades. In any case, the racial stereotypes would reappear later, exploiting new fears.

B. The Dichotomy Between Urban and Rural Life

A prevalent theme in countless novels, films, and other stories concerns the “awakening” an individual goes through when he or she moves from a bucolic way of life in the countryside to the alluring but potentially dangerous urban center. This extends far beyond drug films, of course. The siren song of the city has called to many fictional characters of all stripes. In this country in particular, large cities were always viewed with some suspicion, most likely because the myth of agrarian virtue loomed large in the national consciousness. This nostalgia for simple and honest rural living was part of the distrust of city life. More concrete was a fear of crime and the sense that city dwellers were perhaps too permissive in their outlook. “Permissive” as used in this context generally means permissive in matters sexual and with regards to other illicit behavior, such as drugs. In short, he who ventures to the city, unless he is steadfastly resolute, may well succumb to the pleasures of the flesh and the spirit.

³¹ See MORGAN, *supra* note 13, at 92.

³² *Id.* at 93.

³³ See MUSTO, *supra* note 30, at 219.

³⁴ See *id.*

This theme was echoed in many, if not most, of the early drug films. An excellent example is *Cocaine Fiends*.³⁵ In this film, a mother runs a small roadside diner with her two children, far outside of town. One day, a cocaine runner who is trying to elude the police stops into the diner and meets the young daughter, Jane. She is smitten and he, sensing that he can exploit her naïveté, arranges to meet her again. At a subsequent rendezvous, when she develops a headache, the gangster, Nick, is able to provide her with a headache powder that makes her headache disappear as soon as she inhales it. Nick is quickly able to convince Jane to move to the city to be with him. Jane agrees and sneaks out one night, leaving a note for her mother because she knows she will disapprove.

Immediately upon arriving in the city, Jane discovers that life is not all the way Nick promised. They live in a seedy part of town, and Nick's cronies are disreputable. As Jane becomes "citified," however, she cares less about those things. Once an innocent country girl, she rapidly becomes a nightclub denizen, hanging out at the Dead Rat Café with a rough crowd, drinking too much and indulging in "headache powder" frequently.

Meanwhile, back in the country, Mom waits patiently for Jane to write. Several times we see the rural post delivery coming with yet another empty bag of mail. These scenes are actually among the few poignant scenes in these films. In one scene, the mailman dawdles with a neighbor, reluctant to have to face Jane's mother again and inform her that he has still can deliver no word from her daughter.

Jane's brother Eddie can no longer stand the suspense waiting to hear from Jane. He travels to the city as well and takes a job as a carhop at a drive-in. It doesn't take him long to succumb to the lures of city life either. One of his fellow carhops, an attractive young woman, has already discovered headache powder herself, and she quickly introduces Eddie to its mood-enhancing properties. Their dependence grows until they are both fired from the jobs. Now living in squalor, they discover that she is pregnant. Eddie insists she get an abortion, but she refuses. At this point, she is unable to find work and Eddie is unwilling to try. In order to get money to satisfy their habit, she turns to selling herself. One night when Eddie is off at the opium den, she puts the gas on and closes the windows. Before Eddie returns home to find her dead body, he finally runs into his sister Jane at the opium den.

³⁵ *Cocaine Fiends* (1939) is actually a remake of an earlier film, *The Pace that Kills* (1928), with some slight adjustments made to the plot. The latter, however, is difficult to find, so I have based my discussion on the former.

Fairly melodramatic stuff, no question. It is interesting to note, though, all the ills associated with the move to the city: drinking, drugs, promiscuity, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, prostitution, addiction, and finally death. There is an inexorable arc to this path, and it is an arc that is repeated many times, including in much more recent films. Again, however, the reality was rather different. Cities were growing during this time, and with growth came certain problems, but drug use was not limited to urban areas by any means. There were numerous addicts and drug users in small towns and in the countryside, but their travails were not as sensationalistic, so they received less coverage by the media and few to no fictional accounts. This tendency to attribute drug use to urban life mischaracterized the reasons that actually drove people to try drugs or to develop problems with drugs. It became easier to blame the city itself for drug problems than to examine what other factors might lead to that behavior. That is a pattern that continued throughout the century.

C. The Inevitable Downward Spiral

What each of the films discussed in this section have in common is the notion that anything but complete abstention will lead to total ruin. One puff and you're hooked. Once you are hooked, it's only a matter of (a short) time before you begin the inevitable downward spiral in which your life completely unravels and you come to a bitter end. Once the doctor in *Narcotic* tries his first puff of opium, he cannot resist returning to the den. From there, he loses patients, then friends, then his wife. This does not slow him down, however; he must get his fix. Soon he begins peddling quack medicines and when even that doesn't work out and there is nothing left for him, he kills himself.

Similar fates befell the protagonists in *Cocaine Fiends* and *Marihuana – Weed with Roots in Hell* (1936). In the former, both Jane and her brother Eddie become quickly enslaved to the cocaine they first tried as a pick-me-up. From there they move rapidly to other, "more serious" drugs while their lives fall apart. In the latter, our heroine is jealous that her sister appears to be headed for life as a society woman with her impending marriage. She and her boyfriend take up with a rougher crowd and try marijuana at the beach party discussed above. The "pusher" threatens to make this information unless the boyfriend, Dick, helps him make a few deliveries. Needless to say, Dick is caught in a police sting and is shot to death. Unfortunately, he has gotten Burma pregnant. She is forced to put the baby up for adoption. Left with little, she schemes to kidnap and hold her sister's new baby for

ransom, only to discover too late that the child is her own. When the police come to arrest her, she overdoses and dies.

Again, a ridiculous plot. But the message of *Marihuana* and the other films is quite clear: don't even think about trying drugs unless you are prepared to sacrifice everything, including your money, your honor, and probably your life. In case this heavy-handed message was not clear, the films are usually preceded by an alarmist crawl that makes essentially the same point, that the scourge of the Demon Dope must be battled at every turn.

This depiction of drugs as an inexorable force that will lead to your destruction, although popular, has little basis in fact. The ideas about "gateway" drugs, particularly marijuana, have been fairly well debunked. Trying one drug does not necessarily lead to a craving for stronger and more dangerous drugs at all. The notion that addiction is rapid in onset is also usually not true. Still, this assumption continues to rear its head, up to and including the crack cocaine "epidemic."

Some might argue that yes, these descriptions of drug use are simplistic and inaccurate in many ways, but to the extent that they *do* scare people from experimenting, that is a good thing. I disagree. I think that the all-out drug war of the past two decades has its roots in this thinking. "We must stop *all* drug use, without exception," because "once you get on that train, you can't get off." There is no room for compromise, or a subtle understanding of the issues. War must be won, and only complete victory against the enemy will suffice. I believe there is a very direct link between this pop culture idea that the first "puff" is a precipice which you must avoid, and the political reality that has constructed an enormous wall at that precipice.

D. Sexual Licentiousness

It seems there has always been a strong link in film between sex and drugs. Perhaps this is because they are both taboo subjects and thus naturally became linked as "kissing cousins." Erotic imagery and erotic stories long predate movies, of course, and repressed, puritanical American society has always eagerly gobbled them up – a subject for another paper entirely. Yet it is probably for similar reasons that films and stories about drugs have proliferated as well. They both offer a taste of what the other, more wild elements of society are doing. Someone prone to casting off inhibitions (among other things) in one area will be more likely to cast them off elsewhere as well. So there was a myth that drugs that altered consciousness had aphrodisiac properties, and these films enlarged that myth.

Examples of sexuality abound in the early drug films. Sometimes, the references are direct, more often they are suggested. In *Marihuana – Weed with Roots in Hell*, they are both. At a beach party thrown by a shady character, a group of young girls tries one of his funny hand-rolled cigarettes. Soon they are giggling like crazy and having a grand old time. One suggests that they go for a swim under the stars, and before you know it, the women can be seen racing into the surf *sans* clothing. Their little escapade ends tragically (of course) when it is discovered that one of the group just kept swimming and swimming and never came back.

Explicit nudity, even of the dark and hard-to-distinguish variety seen here, was not often shown. However, references to sex were frequent. Most often, couples who had been using drugs would quickly fall into each other's arms before the camera cut away. "The drug experience came to seem a sexual reverie, whether as an unnatural substitute for the sex act, or as an aphrodisiac."³⁶ The women who lost their virtue this way would fairly rapidly become "fallen" women. They would either become gangster molls, or turn to "other" means to support themselves. In this way, drugs were also linked to prostitution.

In reality, most drug users don't use narcotics as a sexual stimulant or prelude to sexual activity. It may be true that some drugs diminish inhibition, but many, depressants in particular, actually inhibit sexual activity. This was not a detail that would trouble filmmakers looking to titillate an audience, of course. Mixing sex and drugs was an economic decision that made sense. However, the net effect was to draw a picture of a drug user as someone who could not control their appetites, sexual or otherwise. This made the characters safely remote from the viewers – "I wouldn't give in to temptation like that" – which further marginalized the whole issue and made people less prone to believe that they or someone they knew might face the problem in the future.

E. Reckless Youth

One element most of these films have in common is their age of their central characters – all young. This is not surprising, films are marketed to particular demographic groups. Nor is it entirely inaccurate, young people are more likely to try and use drugs than older people. But what comes across fairly strongly is a real *fear* of youth. The young people are a threat to the social order. Their rebelliousness is expressed in all the ways thus far described. They reject their parents' upbringing, preferring instead the wild and whimsical urban life. They

³⁶ MORGAN, *supra* note 13, at 57.

are not properly chaste, but instead unafraid of their longings and free with their bodies. Most threateningly, they indulge in mood-altering chemicals. All of this behavior is indulgent, but drugs are perhaps the most indulgent of all. They are *only* intended to be pleasurable, nothing more – the id roaming free, if you will – and a starched and puritanical society abhors nothing more than pleasure for pleasure’s sake. Sex at least has the benefit of procreation. It’s even necessary, really, at least occasionally. But drugs are purely narcissistic and are thus emblematic of how the youth is not to be trusted with the reins of society, yet again.

This is a theme common to youth movies, of course. Generations are often pitted against each other and the young usually are the fun and free-wheeling ones and the older generation the “square” one. But drugs introduce a new element, a certain irresponsibility that may be absent in, say, the typical Frankie and Annette movie. The criticism is no longer just that these kids are having too much fun, but that they can’t be trusted to be productive members of society. They are too busy with petty trifles.

F. What Happened to the Code?

The reader may wonder while reading the descriptions of the above films, how did these titles get past the Hays Code? The beginnings of the Hays Code dates back date back to the early 1920s when Will Hays, the former Postmaster General, was selected by the movie studios themselves to head the newly created Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). The function of the organization was three-fold: to rein in excesses in the profession, to disarm a growing body of critics who wished to censor the industry, and in general to deflect negative attention away from Hollywood.³⁷ As sound film developed, local censorship increased and calls for industry control grew louder. To combat these threats, Hays promulgated a list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” to encourage movie makers to minimize their provocative material. The “Don’t” column – meaning a subject or image unfit for *any* sort of depiction – included “illegal traffic in drugs,” alongside sex perversion, children’s sex organs, and miscegenation.³⁸ The “Be Careful” column – subjects that were to be rendered in good taste and severed from any suggestive allusions – included “use of drugs” and “methods of smuggling.”³⁹

³⁷ See STEVENSON, *supra* note 25, at 17.

³⁸ The entire list – even this small sampling, actually – provides an interesting window on the fears and anxieties present in society at that time.

³⁹ See STEVENSON, *supra* note 25, at 21.

Primarily because of the success of early sound films, however, this early attempt at regulation was largely ignored by the studios. In 1930, Hays commissioned a Jesuit priest and Catholic publisher to draft the Production Code, which laid out more specific guidelines for acceptable portrayals of sex, violence, and other issues of concern to the censors.⁴⁰ This early Code was not effective, either, because there were few enforcement mechanisms behind it. That changed in 1934, however, when the National Legion of Decency, formed by the Catholic church in 1930, threatened a massive boycott. That and other pressures led to the formation of the Production Code Administration (PCA), which would be headed by Joe Breen for the next twenty years.⁴¹ The PCA had “absolute power to approve, censor or reject movies made or distributed by the studios,” and it “reviewed each individual film with what seems to us today an incredible attention to detail.”⁴²

Any film judged not up to Code standards would not receive its official seal, which had a serious impact on the film’s distribution.⁴³ At this time, production, distribution and exhibition were “vertically integrated,” meaning that most of the first-run theaters were owned by the movie studios. Consequently, non-seal films could not get first-run distribution. However, there were still a lot of theaters in America that would play non-seal films, including rural theaters, some urban houses, the “specialty” (read “ethnic”) circuit, and drive-ins. There was also the practice of “road-showing,” where a distributor would take the film directly to the theater owner, book it for a few nights, put up posters, and split the proceeds.⁴⁴ The motivation, of course, was economic. Just because the Code eliminated certain behavior from the screen didn’t mean audiences weren’t interested in seeing it. Scandalous behavior – whether it be sexual in nature, drug-related, etc. – has always sold tickets at the box office.

The drug films released in the Code era still found willing audiences, in short. To a certain extent, the fact that they were *not* mainstream Hollywood releases worked in their favor. Audiences interested in salacious material of any sort knew they had to go to the independent circuit to get it, so the very fact that the films were playing this

⁴⁰ See THOMAS SCHATZ, *THE GENIUS OF THE SYSTEM: HOLLYWOOD FILMMAKING IN THE STUDIO ERA* 167 (1988).

⁴¹ See STEVENSON, *supra* note 25, at 23.

⁴² Michael Asimow, *Divorce in the Movies: From the Hays Code to Kramer vs. Kramer*, 24 LEGAL STUDIES FORUM 228-119 (2000).

⁴³ The only drug-related film to be released in this interregnum was *To the Ends of the Earth* (1948), a crime thriller about drugs which was the pet project of the head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger, who was also the star.

⁴⁴ See STEVENSON, *supra* note 25, at 24.

circuit was promotion of a sort. *Narcotic* is a good example of this scenario. The film played thousands of engagements at independent movie houses before it went on the roadshow circuit, where it played sporadically into the 1950s!⁴⁵

In any event, social mores change, and the Code, while still fully functioning, was beginning to lose steam by the 1950s. An Otto Preminger film, *The Moon is Blue* was released in 1953 without a seal and did well at the box office, cracking the economic door open.⁴⁶ Joe Breen retired in 1954, and in 1955, another Otto Preminger film, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, was released without a seal and was still commercially successful. This film was *about* drugs, as Frank Sinatra played a heroin addict who was trying to kick the habit. Drugs began appearing in films again shortly thereafter.

V. THE MODERN ERA

The films from the '20s and '30s all seem very outdated. Their plotting is unbelievable and their themes simplistic. We might think, then, that the stereotypes and myths they perpetuated have been left behind, but it turns out they haven't. The emphasis has shifted in places, but it is clear that many of the same negative and stereotyped depictions are still present in recent films, which continues to obfuscate public understanding of who uses drugs, why they use them, and what, if anything, should be done to combat them.

As mentioned above, the importance of the Code began to diminish at the end of the 1950s as American society, emerging from the McCarthy era, started to become more tolerant again. That open-mindedness extended to drugs, and the 1960s marked a resurgence of a tolerant phase towards drug use. The '60s are still remembered as a time of, if not peace and happiness, at least openness to new ideas. That included openness to experimentation with drugs. LSD first made its appearance as a mood-altering drug,⁴⁷ thanks in large part to Timothy Leary and his cohorts at Harvard. Possession and consumption of LSD was made illegal in 1966 as its effects became known, but that did not decrease its use. Marijuana, which had evolved from its

⁴⁵ See *id.* at 25.

⁴⁶ See ASIMOW, *supra* note 42, at 232-33.

⁴⁷ LSD was synthesized in 1938 by a Swiss chemist, Albert Hoffman, who first tried using it in 1943, presumably by accidentally absorbing some through his fingertips. Its primary user in this period between 1943 and about 1962 was the United States military, who used it to really frightening ends, testing its military uses. Although there is no explicit reference to psychoactive drugs in John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), one can't help but think of these military experiments during the brainwashing sequences.

Mexican roots to become the drug of choice for jazz musicians in the 1940s and 1950s, became widely available and was widely used among the youth. The effects of these drugs, and others such as psilocybin mushrooms, seemed in keeping with the spirit of the times.

Many films of this period featured drugs, either as a primary or secondary theme. Not surprisingly, their portrayal during this period was fairly benign, even celebratory. "Hip" films such as *The Trip* (1967), written by Jack Nicholson and starring Peter Fonda as a television commercial director who tries LSD for the first time, and *Head* (1968) featuring the Monkees in a series of vignettes, suggested that taking drugs could be enlightening, or at least a heck of a lot of fun.

This slightly goofy "psychedelic" film period did not last long, however. In the early '70s, some films began to take a grittier look at the role drugs were playing in the community. As the public mood towards drugs began to sour again later in that decade, the old stereotypes began to reappear, just with some of the details changed.

A. Is Race Still an Issue?

The drugs changed, and the minority groups were re-aligned somewhat, but these associations persist in more modern films as well. In the early 1970s, drug use was fairly widespread, but ambivalence began to grow as drugs became more of a "business" and more and more money became involved. An interesting group of unrelated but similarly themed films from the '70s, the so-called "blaxploitation" pictures, looked at the effects drugs were having in the inner cities, although they did it through the lens of good old-fashioned action movies. Films such as *Shaft*, with Richard Roundtree racing the streets to Isaac Hayes' unforgettable music, and *Foxy Brown*, starring full-bodied Pam Grier bursting out of a series of sexy outfits, starred African-American characters, were often directed by African-Americans, and were targeted at that market as well. The one thing that all these films have in common besides action and good soundtracks is significant drug use in the community.

Superfly (1972) stars Ron O'Neal as "Preacher," a cocaine pusher who has decided that he doesn't like the looks of his future. He wants to get out of "the life," but to do that, he needs to make one more big score. The film follows his attempts to set up this last buy so that he can retire with over a million dollars.

Not surprisingly, given the lead character's profession, cocaine is used freely in the film. Preacher wears a small spoon on a necklace so that he has access not just to try product, but to keep himself going. The drug serves as a kind of social lubricant; when he meets with any

friends or business associates, they naturally take a few snorts before proceeding.

The drug is also clearly a tool of oppression. When Preacher brings his partner Eddie to his apartment to tell him about his plans to hit it big and get out of the business, Eddie looks around and is incredulous: "You gonna give all this up? Eight track stereo, color TV in every room, and you can snort half a piece of dope every day? That's the American dream, nigger. Well, ain't it? Ain't it?" Eddie can't understand Preacher's idea because drugs have become a proxy for success. Drugs equal money, and money of course equals success, so cocaine is literally the tool that can lift them away from their roots and transplant them to a different social class. How far Preacher has come is inferred from his car, a nice Cadillac, his clothing, very sharp, and the fact that he had *both* a black girlfriend and a white one.

What makes *Superfly* and others of its ilk rather interesting is the twist it puts on racial themes. Preacher, who is essentially a likable character, Eddie, and the others haven't picked drug dealing as their path to success because they are lazy, greedy, or evil. In fact, they haven't picked it all, it has picked them. As Eddie says, "I know it's a rotten game, but it's the only one the Man left us to play, and that's the stone cold truth." This point is brought home forcefully when the cops find out that Preacher has a big buy lined up. They want a piece of the action in return for letting him continue in business. Not just that, but once he takes this step up, they won't let him quit. It turns out that the main supplier is the (white) police commissioner, who wants Preacher just where he is, selling coke in the African-American community. Eddie, the practical one, doesn't have a problem with that. He sees that the future is a trap, but he doesn't mind so long as he can cash in along the way. He says bitingly to Preacher, "I know you got this fantasy in your head about getting out of the life and setting that *other* world on its ear. But what the fuck are you going to do except hustle? Besides pimping."

This is an indictment, of course, of the options available to an ambitious and intelligent African-American man like Preacher who wants to make a better life for himself. Only illegal avenues are open, either drugs or prostitution. Nonetheless, *Superfly* and numerous other blaxploitation pictures that feature a host of drug pushers are notable for again tying cocaine strongly to the African-American community for the first time since before the Depression. To some extent, this reflected social reality. Drugs and crime were becoming increasingly prevalent in large cities that that were themselves financially struggling at the time. To an extent, though, this just reflected dramatic necessi-

ties. Drugs, sex, prostitution, and crime always make for a volatile story, a requirement for action pictures.

This connection would continue well beyond the 1970s. If anyone doubts that questions of race still play a part in attitudes towards drugs, they need only look at the hysteria surrounding the crack cocaine “epidemic” of the 1980s into the 1990s. The first stories about crack in the national media appeared in November, 1984 in the *Los Angeles Times* and November, 1985 in the *New York Times*. Neither received much attention, but for whatever reason, by mid-1986, the focus took hold.

Newspapers, magazines, and television stations aired sensationalized stories about the terrible effect crack had on its users. The major media outlets provided almost daily, prominently displayed coverage of the spread of crack, so it was not surprising that drugs soon came to dominate the list of social issues that concerned the American public.⁴⁸

Between 1985 and 1989, the percentage of Americans who believed that drugs were the most serious problem facing the country skyrocketed, from 2 percent to 38 percent.⁴⁹

B. The “New” Urban Myth

Of course, crack was just the latest in a long line of drugs that threatened to undermine society. The fact that crack was perceived as a drug of the inner city only heightened the condemnation. The 1992 film *New Jack City* is a good example of the fear that persists of the urban center. Wesley Snipes plays Nino Brown, the leader of the Cash Money Brothers, a group of African-American men and women who decide to go for the big time when they discover crack and see its monetary potential. The film is mostly a B-grade gangster picture, with black leads and a hip-hop soundtrack masking the fact that the plot and the dialogue are hackneyed. But there are some interesting elements to it, nonetheless.

The gang decides that the best way to expand their business is to take over an entire apartment complex in Harlem. The building is enormous, an entire city block, with a large courtyard. They intimidate the building’s owner and harass the residents, and before you know it, they are running a huge operation that includes processing, sales, accounting, and a heavy dose of security. The irony is that the residents have nowhere to go. Although the “good guys” – two undercover cops played (convincingly) by Ice-T and (very unconvincingly) by Judd Nelson – are trying to infiltrate Nino’s operations, the police otherwise

⁴⁸ BELENKO, *supra* note 22, at 306.

⁴⁹ *See id.*

have no interest in the fact that an entire residential complex has been converted to a sort of “crack central.” Sentries are posted at all the doors to the outside, which are heavily barricaded. Residents are forced to run a gauntlet of users who have taken over the courtyard to smoke the drugs. The building becomes a city unto itself, with its own rules and strictly enforced codes.

If this seems a little far-fetched, too implausible even for a story of this sort, the response is that it all takes place *in Harlem*. Anything can happen up there. If you thought perhaps that Harlem had emerged from its low point in the 1970s to become mostly a lower-middle class neighborhood with some bad pockets sprinkled around, well, you were wrong. It’s still a haven for drug warlords and crackheads. It’s a lawless place, where the police are too indifferent, or too frightened, or both, to do anything. So it isn’t surprising that an enormous drug factory could spring up and prosper with little interference.

New Jack City is really a more modern blaxploitation film. It shares the earlier film’s settings, fondness for action, and (primarily) African-American cast and director.⁵⁰ It also shares a bleak portrait of urban life, and a conviction that drugs are at the center of this life. In the end, of course, the good guys do successfully infiltrate the group and bring it down. The bad guys get their just desserts. Nino beats a drug rap thanks to good lawyering, but an older black man who was criticized Nino for bringing drugs to the community shoots and kills him on the steps of the courthouse. But the film, despite its traditional cops-and-gangsters story, still leaves an unpleasant sense of rampant crack use and urban anomie. Drugs seem to be an integral part of urban life, particularly in African-American areas.

Other films from roughly the same time showed the effect of drugs on African-American neighborhoods with more honesty, films such as *Boyz N the Hood*. Unlike the one-dimensional roles in *New Jack City*, the central characters in this film, set in South-Central Los Angeles, have depth and are engaging. The struggle to grow and mature in the face of adversity is gripping. Gangs are what make their lives problematic, and the *raison d’être* of gangs, of course, is drugs. So drugs still feature prominently as a defining issue in the lives of these the young men and women.

Some of these films are better than others, some are more grounded in reality than others. The problem is that, collectively, they

⁵⁰ The director, Mario van Peebles, is the son of the director Melvin van Peebles, who directed several blaxploitation films in the 70’s, including *Sweet Sweetback’s Baaadasssss Song* (1971).

reinforce the idea that drug use is still rampant in urban areas, particularly poorer neighborhoods and African-American communities. Even at the height of popularity of crack, however, the people using that drug came from all walks of life. Many were White or Latino. Some were suburban and well-educated. Some were professionals, some were homeless people. Some people developed severe addictions that dramatically affected their lives, others did not. You would never have known this from depictions in popular culture, however. There, the problem was urban and it was in the minority community. What this means in practice is that the problem is *out there*, away from us. It's uptown, or it's in South Central. The more severable the problem is, the less society as a whole has to do any introspection. If the problem *is* out there, on the other side of town, and it's concentrated in neighborhoods where people "don't look like I do," then I will be less interested in finding a solution. I might still be interested in reading inflammatory stories in the media, or seeing exploitative movies, but I'm not interested in genuinely confronting the problem. That translates into: less funding for drug treatment programs, less funding for awareness programs about drugs, and certainly more calls for harsher punishment for those involved in drugs.

It is not coincidental that a large crackdown on drugs came at this time. Watching these news reports and these movies, the response from armchair politicians everywhere was "get tough." "Drugs are the most serious problem facing the nation." "We have to stem the tide." In 1986, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed, the first comprehensive federal drug legislation in nearly twenty years. The act increased prison sentences for drug sale and possession, eliminated probation or parole for certain drug offenders, increased fines, and allowed for forfeiture of assets.⁵¹ More federal funding went to law enforcement, prisons, interdiction, and other supply reduction efforts than to treatment or prevention.⁵² Drugs were declared a "national security problem."⁵³

Were drugs really a national security problem? Fifteen years later, it doesn't seem so. From this distance in time, it seems more like politicians were exploiting myths about drugs for their own purposes. "Problems" need to be fixed, and fixing takes money – in the federal government's case, lots of it, to the Defense Department for new machinery and weapons to fight the drug war, to the new so-called "prison-industrial complex" to build more prisons, etc. That critique is beyond the scope of this paper, but the relevant point is that these

⁵¹ See BELENKO, *supra* note 22, at 307.

⁵² See *id.*

⁵³ See *id.*

myths *came from somewhere*. They might be exploited for different ends, but only because they are already a part of the national consciousness. Pop culture is a large part of what has put them there.

C. Bored Youth

The indictment of youth for their dalliances with drugs continues. Again, this reflects the simple reality that drug use is more heavily concentrated in the younger segment of the population, but, surprisingly, the condemnation is often similar in tone to the films of seventy or eighty years ago. That is, drug use by youths is not shown in context. It isn't connected with peer pressure, or social concerns, or socio-economic status, or family issues. Rather, drugs are consumed out of boredom and idleness, a lack of interest and concern in the outside world.

A paradigmatic film of this type is *Less than Zero* (1987), starring Andrew McCarthy, Robert Downey, Jr., and Jami Gertz – a classic “Brat Pack” ensemble.⁵⁴ The film was based on the well-known and presumably “generation-defining” novel of the same by Bret Easton Ellis. I think the film doesn't really capture the deadpan style of the book, but the characters in both are motivated by little more than a vague dread of the future. They kill time by hanging out with each other, doing drugs, and having sex. These are children of privilege with beautiful homes in Beverly Hills, nice cars, and expensive clothing. The world is presumably theirs for the taking, but they are not interested. That involves too much effort, energy that could be better spent indulging themselves. The primary means of indulgence, of course, is drugs.

The threat the younger generation poses now is far different than the innocents-turned-criminals of the 1930s film, or even the radical motorcycle-driving, experience-seeking youth of 1960s films. The former were seduced into their errant lifestyles, the latter seemed motivated by genuine curiosity. Today's youth, it seems, threaten to topple the social order not by force, but by merely by ignoring it, by not taking over the reins when their time should come. They may have everything at their fingertips but they are more interested in navel-gazing and in the transitory pleasures that drug use can provide.

Is today's portrayal of youth any more accurate than that of the past? Applications to colleges and to professional schools have soared over the last two decades. Youthful entrepreneurs were nauseatingly

⁵⁴ Watching the film now, it's easy to see why the “Brat Pack” had less staying power than its namesake. Still, it is unnerving to watch Robert Downey, Jr. eagerly freebasing cocaine and ingesting every other drug he can think of, given his much-publicized drug problem. The role that drug use by celebrities plays in shaping public attitudes towards drugs is an interesting topic in and of itself.

common in the 1990s. Volunteer and pro bono work among the young has been steadily on the rise as well. At the same time, drug use in this period has not been high, but it has been steady.⁵⁵ Drug use may be confined to the segment of the population that is not so practically minded or success-oriented, or it may simply be that drug use does not interfere with these goals. Either way, it seems clear that drugs will not actually sap young people of their productive abilities.

D. Sexual "Freedom"

Another film that shows the dangerous nature of youth today is Larry Clark's 1995 film *Kids*. Clark has taken a lot of criticism for his portrayal of teen New Yorkers living utterly amoral, self-destructive lives. Clark has accused his critics in turn of not understanding his motives, but his film is neither critical nor celebratory of his subjects.

Kids is primarily the story of Telly and his friend Casper, two middle-class white teens living in Manhattan. Their story is told in a naturalistic, quasi-documentary style, as if the camera were simply following them around for the day. The film opens with Telly seducing a virginal young girl by making the usual blandishments. The effect is jarring because, although the scene is familiar from many films, the characters here are only 15 or 16. It turns out that Telly has only two interests in life, sexual conquest and drugs. His sole goal is to seduce as many virgins as he can, and to use drugs to pass the time in between.

The story takes place in one day. We soon meet Jennie, played by Chloe Sevigny, one of Telly's past conquests, who admits to her friends that Telly was her only sexual experience. She too is only about 15. When she accompanies a more promiscuous friend to the AIDS clinic to be tested, it turns out that Jennie is the one who has AIDS. She also finds out that Telly intends to seduce the sister of a friend of theirs that night, a young girl of 13(!) and sets out to find him, presumably before he can infect someone else with the HIV virus.

What happens in between is merely this: Telly and his equally amoral friend Casper roam the streets, steal money from their parents, steal beer and food from a deli, nearly beat someone to death, buy and smoke a lot of drugs, and drink until they pass out. Gone is any romantic notion of youth. Casper and Telly, and their friends, are not just experimenting, they are on a mission, but their mission is simply sex and drugs. They spurn the idea of finding a job during the summer – that would get in the way of their pursuit of pleasure.

⁵⁵ See SAMHSA 1999 Survey, *supra* note 2.

Kids is a fairly complex film. It presents completely despicable, amoral characters, but it casts them as young teens, an age we generally do not associate with such viciousness and explicit cruelty. Clark came under criticism perhaps because there is no come-uppance, there is no retribution for the harms these boys visit on others. The very blandness of his depiction is itself a criticism, I believe, but what caught my attention was the strong link again between sex and drugs. Drugs are a way for the boys to simply pass time with each other; they are also a way to break down barriers the teenage girls may put up in the way of having sex. Sex is a target and drugs are the weapon of choice.

Is this a realistic portrayal of today's teens in New York? There is no question that kids are experimenting at younger and younger ages, with sex, drugs, and other things. It is in the nature of youth to experiment, but *Kids* depicts a generation that has abandoned all other interests and goals. It's not clear whether they are motivated by deep-seated and repressed anger, or by boredom. In either case, sex and drugs are not just rites of passage, they are a way of life.

The sex here is not titillating, it is depressing. We don't know for sure that Telly is aware that he has AIDS, but we suspect it, which makes his determination even more execrable. In the end, Jennie does not reach him in time, and he deflowers the 13 year-old girl. Sex and drugs, it appears, are still a potent package, a tool for a generation that may simply have too much time on its hands. Sexual "freedom" now looks more like a prison, and drugs are one of the keys that can put you there.

E. The Road to Ruin

Modern films are more sophisticated, by and large, than their predecessors. As a result, we mostly don't see the same heavy-handed approach that spelled a character's doom the moment they tried drugs. However, the association of drugs with sheer *excess*, with excessive wants and desires, continues. Witness Brian De Palma's 1983 film *Scarface*. This film is an interesting point of comparison, because it is a "remake" of Howard Hawks' 1932 gangster classic of the same name, featuring Paul Muni as Al Capone. The original *Scarface*, of course, was made during the Prohibition Era, and was about the rise of Capone through his bootlegging operations, followed by his eventual (fictionalized) fall. In the more modern version, Al Pacino, in an over-the-top performance, plays Tony Montana, a Cuban mobster living in Miami who gets involved in the cocaine trade. The parallels are clear – the prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s directly resulted in the rise of a criminal syndicate whose power continued for decades. Similarly, the "war

on drugs” in the early 1980s did nothing to diminish the demand in this country, it only provided enormous wealth for the new breed of gangsters who were now “bootlegging” a new substance to American consumers.

De Palma’s film is not political, however. There is no real suggestion that drug prohibition, like prohibition of alcohol, is doing more harm than good. His version is simply about greed and the role it plays in the American dream. As Tony says, “In this country, you gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money, you get the power. Then when you get the power, you get the woman.” Tony ends by achieving all of these things: first money, then power, then the beautiful blonde American wife (Michelle Pfeiffer in one of her earlier roles). The means that set this process into motion in the first place is cocaine. Through his street savvy, his brutality, and the unyielding thirst for drugs in the populace, Tony gradually becomes extremely wealthy and very powerful. Along the way, however, he breaks one of the “cardinal” rules: don’t get high on your own supply. Tony cannot resist the allure of the drug any more than he can resist his desire to acquire material possessions. Neither, it seems, can the people around him. His wife is a veritable addict, always seen with sniffing from a small spoon. His sister is a great indulger, as are friends and henchmen.

The reason that no one can resist is clear: cocaine is a symbol, a sign of wealth and achievement, which, although not spelled out in Tony’s equation, is also supposed to lead to happiness. But not surprisingly, no one here *is* happy. Quite the opposite. The more money, the more cocaine, the more “success,” the more miserable they become. It turns out that drugs still *do* lead one on the road to ruin. Tony’s drug use, his megalomania, and his paranoia rapidly get out control. His excesses become so extreme that there is nowhere for him to go, but out in a blaze of guns, surrounded by piles of cocaine.

Drugs here symbolize the corruption of the American dream. They are inextricably intertwined with greed, with excess, with the darker side of American’s thirst for money and power. If Tony’s ill-gotten gains had been acquired through some other kind of criminal activity – money laundering, perhaps – the story would not have been the same at all. Drugs weren’t simply the means to wealth, they were also the tool of his destruction. Tony’s biggest mistake was to get mixed up in his own supply. Once he started using the drugs, everything he has worked hard for quickly unravels. So drugs still are still used, not just as to demonstrate the inevitable downward spiral of the individual, but even the downward spiral of the American dream.

VI. CONCLUSION

Most of the early drug films were not serious treatments of any aspect of the subject. They did not accurately depict the effect of drugs or distinguish between different levels of dependency that each might create. They made no attempt to reflect truthfully the different segments of society that might be using drugs, or why they did so. Instead, they sought to bring audiences in with promises of scandalous activity “never before seen on film.” That they delivered much less titillation than they promised did not stop the audiences from coming in the next time. Essentially, the filmmakers wanted it both ways: they wanted to offer provocative material and yet be preachy and moralistic at the same time. Thus, the films were usually preceded by dire warnings about the “evil scourge” that was affecting society, which “must be protected against at all costs,” etc. The characters who chose to indulge in sex or drugs were all conclusively shown to have thrown their lives away.

From a cinematic standpoint, these films are largely forgettable. Their plots are far-fetched and their characters thinly drawn. From a social standpoint, though, the films did have an impact. Attitudes towards drugs were very much in flux at that time. People didn't know a great deal and what they did know was not necessarily accurate. They weren't sure how harmful drugs were, or sometimes even whether they were taking them or not. They also didn't know how to treat people who developed problems related to drugs. This is when the two separate schools of thought began to develop for responding to drug use: treating excess use as an illness that warranted treatment and leaving the rest be, or treating it all as criminal behavior that required punishment. Public opinion waxed and waned on this issue as treatment centers were instituted in the early part of the century, then largely fell out of favor as the temperance movement took hold in the '20s and '30s. These films came at a critical time, then, in the formation of public attitudes towards drugs and what society's response should be. By associating drugs with negative concepts such as dishonest foreigners, seedy urban settings, promiscuity, and lack of control, not just drugs but the people who used them began to be demonized. Drugs were associated with a lot of *other* problems – or what were perceived as problems, anyway, such as immigration, promiscuity, the anonymity of city life, etc. – and became difficult to evaluate on their own. The response thus became punitive, a trend that has persisted to the present day.

Modern films have treated these issues in a slightly more sophisticated fashion. Audiences today are more demanding, and to some ex-

tent are more knowledgeable about drugs. However, their perceptions of the role that drugs play in society, and the extent to which that role should be curbed, are still largely shaped by the images and narratives they encounter in the media and throughout popular culture. Upon inspection, it turns out that these stories are still in many ways grounded in the myths developed in an earlier time. Perhaps these myths are simply too strong to resist. Drugs are a convenient symbol for venality, for loss of control, and for a host of other things that critics can use to demonstrate that society has become wayward. I hope that by examining some of these myths in context, both in the past and in the present, some of the inaccuracies about drug use may be shed. A cold and clear-eyed look at this issue is the only way to develop a sensible mix of legal and social mechanisms for minimizing the negative impact of drugs while without over-regulation. Drugs are not going away, a fact that many policymakers don't seem to realize. They are a part of history that waxes and wanes in phases, but they cannot be eliminated. Popular culture will continue to exploit their allure as well. The reach and impact of popular culture is far and wide, and its effects are sometimes greater than we realize. That is why it is important to deconstruct its impact on a subject that, like it or not, is with us to stay.