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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Junkie love—Romance and addiction on the big screen

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Abstract: This article investigates the filmic construction of two disparate but intertwining cultural practices: those engaging in the life-affirming rituals of romantic love and those performing the potentially self-destructive rituals of hard drug consumption. Discussing a number of key feature films from the (mini) genre “junkie love”, it aims to show what happens when elements of mainstream romantic drama merge with the horror conventions of the heroin addiction film. Drawing amongst others on Murray Smith’s theory of “levels of [spectator] engagement” and Greg Smith’s concept of the “emotion system”, the article concludes that junkie love films, using tropes of the romantic tragedy in the tradition of *Romeo and Juliet*, present a more complex and nuanced approach to drug addicts than the predominantly condemnatory media coverage—one that arguably invites the spectator’s understanding and compassion.

Subjects: Film Studies; Humanities; Media & Film Studies

Keywords: heroin addiction; drug films; romantic drama; spectator engagement

1. Introduction

Stories and images of drug addiction have been part of popular culture for centuries. Not surprisingly perhaps, the cinema, too, since its very inception has tried to scare, thrill, titillate and capture the imagination of film audiences with stories about mind-altering substances, from early silent shorts



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrea Rinke is a senior lecturer in Film Studies and programme leader of the MA in Film Studies at Kingston University. Her article is part of a larger research project, a book project entitled *Getting “high” on Cinema – the Drug Experience Film*. Rinke has been producing work on the topic, including articles for refereed journals such as “Liminal bodies in liminal Spaces: the depiction of Drug addicted Youth in the films *Christiane F.* and *Drifter*” (for *Global Media Journal*) and “The Weekend has Landed! Carnavalesque youth rebellion in the Ecstasy film *Human Traffic* (Justin Kerrigan 1999 UK)” (for *Studies in European Cinema*), as well as a chapter entitled “Performing Drug Addiction on Film” for the book *Addiction and Performance*.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Research has suggested that the media convey a mainly negative impression of drug users which marginalise, misrepresent and demonise them—a public stigmatisation which does not help in reducing the barriers to recovery for people with drug dependence. This article examines representations of heroin-using couples on the big screen aiming to show that—to an extent—they counteract condemnatory media clichés by offering a more rounded, complex and nuanced portrayal of people struggling with a drug addiction. Discussing the junkie love (mini) genre, including films like *Requiem for a Dream* and *Candy*, the article investigates the ways in which the spectator is invited to engage with drug-addicted characters in a more understanding and compassionate fashion rather than merely condemning them outright. A fuller understanding of drug-using couples, albeit mediated through film, could “be tapped for its potential in shaping prevention and intervention efforts” with addiction (Simmons & Singer, 2006, p. 1).¹

such as *Opium* (1919 Ger.) to the recent feature *Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese, 2014, USA). Similarly, our obsession with love and romance pervades every aspect of popular culture from poetry, opera and art to pop song lyrics, romance novels, soap operas and the cinema. This article investigates the filmic construction of two cultural practices which, at first glance, seem quite disparate: those engaging in the “life-affirming” rituals of romantic love intertwined with those performing the potentially self-destructive rituals of hard drug consumption.

These practices have some aspects in common, however. For instance, they revolve around “substances” that can both heal and damage our health. As Evans, (2003) reminds us: “For centuries it has been recognized that love can heal, repair and succour just as much as it can destroy and damage” (p. 27). The same can be said about the use of illicit drugs: “... many of the chief substances of this illicit [drug] business have been used for thousands of years to treat physical pain or mental distress as well as for pleasure” (Davenport-Hines, 2001, p. ix). Moreover, the sensations of falling and being in love and that of drug intoxication can be experienced in quite a similar fashion:

The half-remembered, visceral hurtling-down-the-roller-coaster ... the near delirious, drugged detachment from the outside world ... the addictive high ... For the first time, then, I had discovered the most exquisite abandonment, the ability to lose myself in someone else completely, ... (Flett quoted in Evans, 2000, p. 40)

This quotation about falling in love also highlights another crucial aspect linking romance and addiction: both are intensely physical experiences (Huggins, 2006, p. 165). This article examines how the dual bodily experience of being in love and addicted to heroin is depicted in “junkie love” films. The discussion of these works draws on Genre Studies, exploring the ways in which “junkie love” films allow seemingly incompatible tropes from the horror genre (used in many heroin addiction films) and those from the romance genre to be combined; it also uses semiotic and structural approaches to illustrate with close textual analyses how this is achieved in individual films, leading to an examination of how “junkie love” films invite the spectator to emotionally engage with the characters’ complex relationships on screen. It argues that these films, using romantic tropes, portray addicts in a more sympathetic light, leading to a more nuanced understanding of drug dependence than the outright condemnation propagated by the media. As its main theoretical framework, the article will be drawing upon scholarly work on cinema and emotion, including Ed S. Tan’s *Emotion and the Structure of narrative Film* (Tan, 1996), Murray Smith’s *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Smith, 1995, 2010) and Greg M. Smith’s *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Smith, 2003).

While it is true to say that all films aim to invite the spectators’ sympathy with their main protagonists (Tan, 1996, pp. 171–82), arguably this aim is harder to achieve if these characters embody members of a highly stigmatised and widely feared underclass of society such as heroin addicts. Most cinema audiences will have no first-hand knowledge of addicts to hard drug “in the real world”. Hence, their assumptions and expectations will be shaped to a large extent by the media which—feeding the current ideology of the “War on Drugs”—have tended to create “moral panics” about isolated drug incidents (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009) and contributed to the myth of the “demon drug fiend”. Hence, films about heroin addiction need to overcome particularly strong feelings of resistance when striving to invite spectator’s engagement with their protagonists.

2. Media (Mis) representations and public fears

In 2010, the UKDPC (UK Drug Policy Commission) published the most comprehensive review to date of the way drug use and drug users have been represented in the UK press. Their empirical findings (based on more than 6,000 different news items) confirm Stuart Taylor’s 2008 summary of individual (smaller scale) studies on this matter, namely that the media “demonise” and “marginalise” most drug users, portraying these as “outsiders”, “folk devils” and “threats” to society. In one of these studies, Coomber, Morris, and Dunn, (2000) suggest: “Exaggeration, distortion, inaccuracy, sensationalism; each of these labels has been consistently applied to the reporting of drug related issues

in the print and other media over the last 40 years and beyond” (p. 217); Cape (2003) concurs that in the media and in wider public perception, heroin users have tended to be stereotyped as “losers, wasters, fools” or worse, demonised as dangerous “others” (p. 168). This leads Taylor to the conclusion that there is “undoubtedly a dominant stereotypical image [of drug users] that has emerged, prevailed and been sustained within the reporting of national and local news over the last three decades” (p. 371).

Hence, it is fair to assume that most spectators’ initial approach to drug-addicted characters on screen would lean towards moral disapproval, with the concomitant fear that depictions of drug use will cause harm. For example, a UK national survey in 2,000 investigated what the British public perceived as harmful and offensive depictions on television: “Drugs and drug taking” (75%) was ranked even before “violence” (65%) and “sexual activity” (56%) (Hargrave & Livingstone, 2009, p. 123).²

Psychiatrist Tom Carnwath and drug services manager Ian Smith in their book *Heroin Century*, (Carnwath & Smith, 2002, pp. 81–85) list types of heroin “careers”, the first two of which refer to the occasional user and the middle-class stable user, respectively, who are able to control their consumption and to manage and finance a moderate long-term habit without becoming enslaved to addiction. However, these types are invisible to the wider public, they present no social problems and are hence under-researched and under-represented in film and media. It is the last career outlined in *Heroin Century*—that of the “street junkie”—which has come to embody the popular conception of all types of heroin “careers”. As Stewart (1996, p. 1) puts it in the autobiographical account of her own heroin addiction: “If you take heroin you’re a hopeless junkie, a thieving smack-head and a lost cause. [These are the] myths of heroin as a demon drug and junkies as public enemy number one”. Drug users in relatively stable, loving, long-term relationships are also conceived of in this ostracising fashion, as not having lovers or spouses but merely “sexual partners” befitting the negative image “of drug users as strange, unsavoury creatures who live on the streets ...” (Glick-Schiller, 1992, p. 243). Drawing on Glick-Schiller’s research, Simmons concludes: “Romantic partnerships between drug-using couples, when they are recognized at all, tend to be viewed as dysfunctional, unstable, utilitarian, and often violent” (Simmons & Singer, 2006, p. 1). Harry Shapiro, the former DrugScope director of communications and current director of DrugWise, points out: “The biggest problem is that the mythologies which have grown up around the subject serve only to isolate and marginalise those with serious drug problems and the friends, and families desperate to try to help their loved ones are shamed in to silence” (2005, p. 5).

3. Heroin experience films

Given the public perception of drug use, it is perhaps not surprising to find that heroin experience films have tended to shy away from depicting the aspects of pleasure related to drug consumption. Film censorship boards share the media’s tacit assumption that such films would invariably invite “copycat” behaviour and hence have the potential to corrupt their young viewers (even though all films featuring class A drugs are classified for viewers over 18s in the USA, Australia and Britain). As the rating guidelines of the BBFC put it: “At 18 drug taking may be shown but the work as a whole must not promote or encourage drug misuse (<http://www.bbfc.co.uk/what-classification/r18>)”. However, despite decades of research into media’s alleged “ill effects” on the young and vulnerable, a direct connection between media consumption and (copycat) behaviour has never been conclusively established: “Media effects in isolation simply are not demonstrable, whatever ‘taken-for-granted’ views may say” (Burton, 2010, p. 109) because these presumed effects are “difficult to isolate and establish, media texts are complex and contradictory, and audiences are active and influenced by other social and cultural factors” (Davis, 2007, p. 7).

Until the late 1950s, the drug addict was banned from mainstream screens altogether and relegated to independent “exploitation” films, which ridiculed and demonised this character as the “other” (Stevenson, 2000, pp. 23–39). It is only since the success of *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Preminger, 1956) and the demise of the Hollywood studio system—with the concurrent relaxation

of censorship rules—that the drug addict has reached mainstream cinema screens and has been shown in stories told from the addict’s own point of view.

Since then, film-makers have chosen to focus on heroin addiction far more often than on any other illicit drug habit³—in fact, there are hundreds of films that include the use of heroin (Markert, 2013, pp. 331–334). However, this article is concerned only with those films in which the use of heroin, the experience of being addicted to the drug and the heroin lifestyle are at the centre of the narrative.⁴

The Man with the golden Arm provided a blueprint for what was to become the predominant heroin addiction narrative: social problem films telling their stories in a melodramatic representational mode. These stories tend to follow the three-act structure of the classic morality tale: seduction; fall from grace; and redemption or death. Hence, the heroin addiction film could be conceived of as a genre in its own right, with recurrent visual motifs and narrative features, including: taking up the habit; scoring; experiencing the “high” and the withdrawal; and ending in abstinence or demise (Rinke, 2014, pp. 43–66).

At the same time, the heroin genre tends to adopt tropes from other (popular) genres, including youth rebellion films, male buddy films and biopics about artists. Films about and for young adults with their “intense age-based peer relationships” are often characterised by the rebellion against and rejection of the older generation’s values (Driscoll, 2011, p. 2). This is also the case, for instance, in *Drugstore Cowboy* (van Sant, 1989, USA), *The Basketball Diaries* (Kalvert, 1995, USA) and *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996 UK), where the use of illicit substances is portrayed as part of just that youthful rebellion. Some heroin addiction films, such as *Adam and Paul* (Leonhard Abrahamson 2004 Ir.) and *Gridlock’d* (Vondie Curtis-Hall 1997, USA), borrow motifs from the (male) buddy movie, with their friendship and the obstacles they face together being based on the shared need to feed their habit or to kick it (respectively).⁵

4. The “Junkie love” film: spectator engagement with dark romance

The “junkie love” film differs from other films about heroin addiction due to its adoption of the romantic (melo) drama narrative, which typically portrays “a couple who meet, fall passionately in love and then are usually torn apart, and always experience suffering” (Todd, 2013, p. 2). The key romantic tropes of passion, devotion, sacrifice, betrayal, break up and suffering are also central to most films of the “junkie love” (mini)genre—albeit to a differing degree of intensity. Due to the introduction of their young characters’ relationship as romance—a universally recognisable trope both on screen and in the “real world”—“junkie love” films offer the spectator access to fictional characters via a process which Murray Smith in his book *Engaging Characters*, (1996, p. 5) has termed “levels of engagement”, in which “recognition” is the first step:

Recognition describes the spectator’s construction of character, [it] requires the referential notion of the mimetic hypothesis ... While understanding that characters are artifices ... we assume that these traits correspond to analogical ones we find in persons in the real world. (Smith, 1995, p. 82)

Moreover, as Smith (2003) puts it, we relate to characters in specific genre films not just by interpreting these with emotional “scripts” gathered from our real-world experiences but also with our knowledge of other genre texts (p. 48). Genres consist of recurrent narrative patterns and iconographic motifs, as well as of “patterns of emotional address”, as Greg Smith calls it, maintaining that the viewers’ “emotional orientation” and “consistency of expectation” are prerequisites for their emotional engagement (p. 40). In the case of the “junkie love” (mini)genre, it is our “recognition” of doomed lovers in romantic dramas who usually face overwhelming obstacles—from *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming 1939, USA) and *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942, USA) to *Titanic* (Cameron 1998) and *Atonement* (Wright 2007, UK) which shapes the audience’s expectation. It arguably also enhances their willingness to feel for and fear for a romantic couple struggling with addiction,⁶ especially if

they are played by fresh faced, attractive and charismatic actors who convincingly perform their characters' "young love". As one film critic summarised the "junkie love" film *Panic in Needle Park* (Schatzberg, 1971, USA) at the time of its release:

The quality I found fascinating about the movie was the relationship between Bobby (Al Pacino in his first major role) and Helen (who won the best actress award at Cannes) ... That's because this film is indeed a love story, and more specifically a carefully observed portrait of two human beings. (Ebert, 1971)

In order to invite spectator engagement with protagonists who are deviant "others" in the public eye, "junkie love" films deploy techniques which, to use Murray Smith's terminology, position us in "alignment" with characters, through spatiotemporal attachment with them and access to their subjectivity (1996, p. 142). The narrational range and depth in "junkie love" films tend to be restricted to the knowledge of the male partner of the couple.⁷ We are invited to share his "perceptual and mental subjectivity" for instance through point of view editing and a "sound perspective" that is dominated by his voice-over revealing his innermost thoughts and feelings. Voice-over in these "junkie romance" films thus establishes an intimate understanding between the narrator and his listener, which is further enhanced by close-ups of his facial expression and musical cues (Gorbman, 1987, p. 83).

Most importantly, the processes of "alignment" and the "recognition" of familiar tropes of love and romance encourage the spectator to take up a position of "allegiance" with the law-breaking "junkie lovers:"

Allegiance pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator ... it depends upon the spectator having what she takes to be reliable access to the character's state of mind, on understanding the context of the character's actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge. (Smith, 1995, p. 84)

Dialogue, voice-over and facial close-ups in "junkie love" films convey their couples' addiction to heroin as part of their love relationship, their addiction to each other. For example, in *Jesus' Son* (MacLean, 1999, USA), the male protagonist's voice-over enthuses about him falling in love at first sight—a classical trope of the romance genre: "There she was, the most beautiful girl in the world". In *Candy*, Dan's falling in love at first site is narrated as magical, too (from hindsight by Dan's voice-over): "When I first met Candy, those were like the days of juice when everything was bountiful ... The future was a thing that gleamed, the present was so very, very good ...". The film opens with a long credit sequence showing Dan and Candy spinning around in a funfair rotor. This complex visual metaphor can be read as symbolising the cyclical nature of heroin addiction, i.e. the addicts are literally "going nowhere fast" and spinning out of control while losing the ground under their feet. However, the camera alternates from catching the blur of rotations from above to shots from within the cylinder, showing us close-ups of the couple's ecstatically smiling faces, kisses and caresses in a dizzying whirlwind of total rapture.

At the peak of their romantic relationship which leads to Dan's proposal of marriage, he reads to Candy from E.E. Cummings' poem "I carry your heart with me" which celebrates the total union of devoted lovers:

Here is the deepest secret nobody knows. Here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide. And this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart ... I carry your heart, I carry it in my heart.

Similarly, in *Requiem for a Dream* (Aronofsky, 2000, USA), the couple, Harry and Marion, are shown lying on a round bed, high on heroin, telling one another how much they love each other: Marion: I love you, Harry. You make me feel like a person. Like I'm me ... and I'm beautiful. Harry:

You are beautiful. You're the most beautiful girl in the world. You are my dream.

Both the bed in *Requiem* and the rotor in *Candy* signify the couple's "insularity" (Preston, 2000, p. 238), their mental state as one secluded from the world in a bubble outside time and space, which is also an established trope in romantic dramas, from *Dr. Zhivago* (Lean, 1965, UK) to *Love Story* (Hiller, 1970, USA) and *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997, USA). As Dan puts it in his voice-over: "We had a lot going for us. We'd found the secret glue that held all things together. In a perfect place, where the noise did not intrude, our world was so very complete".

However, in *Requiem*, the aural impression of intimacy is undermined by the visual rendering of their embrace: extreme close-ups of parts of their faces and fingers caressing each other are being shown in split screen montage—capturing the ambivalent state of being junkie lovers, of feeling in close unity with the beloved, while at the same time, being caught up in their own individual experiences of the high.

More so than any other "junkie love" film, *Candy* dwells on the couple's heroin-induced euphoria in a prolonged and explicit fashion, which is depicted as indistinguishable from the bliss felt through their passionate love. The film celebrates their sensual pleasure in each other's bodies in a visual metaphor that also connotes the heroin high: the sensation of being engulfed and gliding around in warm, womb-like water (famously first seen in *Trainspotting*). Only sun rays intrude into their silent world of blissful abandon—or, in *Candy*'s words, their "extravagant delight". In *Candy*, on the level of the heroin addiction tale, the film closes on a positive note, both protagonists have managed to successfully become "clean" and they still love each other. However, in keeping with the generic conventions of the romantic drama or tragedy, their relationship is doomed. Its association with heroin makes it too painful to continue.

5. Drug use as the lovers' shared adventure

A number of heroin addiction films motivate their characters' drug use as desperate attempts to escape from a reality that they perceive as mind-numbingly mundane or unbearably harsh. By contrast, in "junkie love" films, including *Panic in Needle Park*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, *Requiem* and *Candy*, it is not merely the "pursuit of oblivion" (Davenport-Hines) that attracts the couples to the drug. Instead—at least initially—the "thrill" of the heroin lifestyle is shown as part of their intense, passionate romance—evoking classic films about outlaw couples such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967, USA).⁸

In their first parts, "junkie love" films tend to follow the romantic drama's narrative pattern of overcoming barriers that "stand in the way of true love" (Shumway, 2003, p. 12). Chasing and using an illicit substance together is portrayed both as an obstacle and an enticement to the couple's loving relationship. The risk of being caught breaking the law adds not only the thrill of danger to their life, but also an element of agency and reckless courage. This notably subverts the popular perception of the junkie as a weak and passive victim of the "demon drug". For instance, Bob and Diane in *Drugstore Cowboy* (van Sant, 1989, USA) enjoy being one step ahead of the police inspector chasing them; Harry and Marion in *Requiem*, too, are portrayed as thrill seekers in a sequence where they climb the roof of a tower block and deliberately set off the alarm, captured passionately kissing in the lift of the building on surveillance camera footage. Dan and Candy take an even more reckless deliberate risk by shooting up during a car wash—while a queue is building up behind them. Their elation and excitement is musically underscored by the upbeat exotic rhythms of Cuban dance music (Salsa). In a childlike fashion, they relish the thrill of the giant brushes descending upon them like the arms of a monster that could potentially intrude and drown the passengers—an experience that visually expresses both the pleasure and the danger of taking heroin.

6. "I love you ... and heroin".⁹ The heroin love triangle

Similar to the generic convention of the love triangle in a romantic drama, "junkie love" films depict heroin as the third party in the relationship, sometimes as a love rival and sometimes as the

substitute for love (and sex). For example, in *The Panic in Needle Park*, Helen gets hooked because sharing Bobby's love of heroin seems the only way not to feel shut out when he is high. As one reviewer put it: "It's the one thing he cares about more than her. He won't even make love to her when he's stoned. It's like she's conquering the mistress by taking her to bed" (Croce, 2007). Significantly, Bobby suggests that they should get married when realising that Helen has joined him in his love for heroin.

In *Christiane F.* (Edel, 1981), the young protagonist makes her boyfriend choose between her and heroin. So, when he chooses the drug over her, she decides to use for the first time, also embracing the rival rather than trying to beat it.¹⁰ As for Bob in *Drugstore Cowboy*, his desire for drugs has replaced the desire for his wife entirely: he would rather plan another pharmacy raid than respond to her sexual advances. Candy, too, wants to share Dan's level of intense intoxication, and hence moves from sniffing to injecting heroin. Once the couple share the love for the rival heroin, there are common "lovers' tiffs" when one of them secretly had a "rendezvous" with the rival (the last stash of heroin) without the partner.

7. From romance to horror: from sympathy to compassion?

"Junkie love" films, by introducing the viewers to the couple as loyal and devoted long-term lovers, have enabled the spectator to develop feelings of sympathy for, or even empathy with them. This is arguably the prerequisite for feeling compassion (rather than disgust) when love's young dream turns into the nightmare of full-blown addiction, of heroin horror. In Murray Smith's terms, "central imagining" or "emotional simulation" leads to empathy: "For in simulating an emotion ... we are not merely recognizing or understanding it, but centrally imagining it" as if it happened to us irrespective of whether we share any values, beliefs or goals with the characters (p. 96). Greg Smith in his book *Film Structure and the Emotion System* also uses this concept referring to it as "feeling with" the characters in empathy (rather than "feeling for" them with sympathy).¹¹

It is because "junkie love" films in their first parts clearly establish a romantic mood, eliciting the audience's sympathy, that the viewers start to fear for the couple when recognising the visual and aural cues associated with a horror film. Through the knowledge of films about doomed lovers as well as of media horror stories about the "inevitable" downwards spiral of drugs, the spectator anticipates the "junkie lovers' " downfall, even as the characters believe that their love can conquer all, and that their drug use will not be a problem (Harry and Marion dream of starting a business together once they have enough money through drug dealing; and *Christiane* insists: "I am in control, I can stop any time). The spectators, when seeing the loving couple—for which they have developed empathy—torn apart by the films' ending in the fashion of the romantic tragedy are likely to feel compassion.

"Junkie love" films, like drug experience films in general, are expected (by the censors—and perhaps the wider public) to convey a message in line with the drug policies that make them illegal. Not surprisingly, therefore, most heroin addiction films tend to foreground the suffering associated with the drug, and avoid touching upon its "seductive sensual power" (Carnwath, 2002, p. 98). As Renton in *Trainspotting* puts it: "People think it's all about misery and desperation and death and all that shite ... but what they forget is the pleasure of it. Otherwise we wouldn't do it!"¹² Those films that follow the conventional narrative pattern of the addiction genre tend to map out their characters' downward spiral into utter abjection on their beautiful young bodies which are shown to physically deteriorate in an often horrific fashion. On a metaphorical level, heroin can be read as the horror film's monster that threatens, invades and corrupts "normality" in these films. Recurrent close-ups of needles piercing skin and the syringe sucking in blood before releasing the drug conjures up notions of vampirism, as "the vampire's union is brought about the opening up a wound" (Creed, 1993, p. 70). Both the injection of heroin and the bite of the vampire create a "union" between the user/victim and the heroin/vampire in a euphoric moment which often tends to be likened to a sexual climax, for example, in *Trainspotting*. At the same time, both the heroin addict and the horror monster (the vampire /or the zombie) are shown to be liminal beings, not quite dead but not fully alive

either. In “junkie love” films, visceral visual motifs from the horror genre include images such as the ghoulish facial expressions of characters in *Christiane F.*, who have died from an overdose as well as her own projectile vomiting during withdrawal; the horrors of delivering and holding a tiny stillborn baby in *Candy*, Harry’s arm being amputated (visibly sawn off with blood splattering) due to a putrid infection in *Requiem*, Sid’s stabbing Nancy in the stomach and her bleeding to death on the bathroom floor in *Sid and Nancy* (Cox, 1986), these images which depict heroin users as possessed by the demon drug and as becoming monstrous themselves seem to concur with the media stereotypes of the dangerous “drug fiend” outlined above. Indeed, the majority of “junkie love” stories, like other heroin addiction films, do not shy away from addressing the destructive effect of drug addiction on the lovers’ relationships. Their endings suggest that heroin addiction invariably leads to alienation and separation (*Drugstore*, *Requiem* and *Candy*), or worse, to murderous rows (*Sid and Nancy*) or death by overdose of one of the lovers (*Jesus’ Son*).

However, the strong infusion of romance conventions makes “junkie love” films more complex than other heroin addiction films. On a narrative level, they produce a self-contradictory message: while the couple’s heroin consumption is shown to enhance their passionate romance, the drug also determines their doomed fate. For example, *Requiem*’s final tragic act, entitled “Winter”—echoed in *Candy*’s final part “Hell”—is diametrically opposed to the films’ earlier message in its first part called “Summer” (“Heaven” in *Candy*), namely: that heroin intoxication can enhance passionate love. They show Marion’s and Candy’s descent into prostitution, the couples’ gruelling attempt at cold turkey, their bitter arguments and the final breakdown of their relationships. The films’ ambivalence in terms of narrative and ideology (i.e. the continuity of the love story with its opposite, the “selfish junkie” story) also results in a contradictory spectator address. For example, Bobby in *Panic*, Harry in *Requiem* and Dan in *Candy* are portrayed as selfish addicts in that they—when the heroin supply runs out—let their partners sell themselves to other men. However, previously, the viewers have been introduced and have “recognised” these characters as gentle, caring and committed lovers, and they have shared the couple’s blossoming and thriving romance prior to their downfall. This complexity creates a certain degree of “vicarious cognitive dissonance” for the spectator (Cooper, 2007, p. 117), borne out by viewers’ online responses, for example, to *Candy*: “I found it exhilarating and painful at the same time” (come2whereimfrom, 22 Nov. 2006) and “... mixed emotions went through me ... joy, delight, ... disgust, sadness and sympathy” (Sophia Kodjamanova from Bulgaria, 6 Feb. 2014).

Hence— even if “junkie love” films ultimately send out the expected anti-drug message—they do so while also showing the couple’s pleasure derived from both being high on heroin *and* being high on their love for each other, inviting the audience to sympathise with the familiar trope of reckless “young love”.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, when the romance genre meets the cinematic underbelly of heroin addiction, a less judgemental and more ambiguous take on the addict emerges that includes aspects of love—joy, commitment, youthful risk-taking and pleasure—either related to the drug taking directly or to the lifestyle going with it.

While junkie love films tend to conform to the generic conventions of the heroin addiction narrative, their foregrounding of the love story, using tropes of the romantic tragedy in the tradition of *Romeo* and *Juliet*, results in a more complex, nuanced and sympathetic approach to characters struggling with drug addiction.

Instead of portraying heroin addicts purely in pathologising terms—a discourse preferred by the media—they render the junkie love world not only as both repulsive *and* beautiful but also, to an extent, understandable. By allowing for the depiction of drug-induced pleasure, romantic love and shared adventure (as well as pain), arguably these films invite their spectators to engage with and sympathise with these characters rather than condemn these outright—even though they are heroin addicts.

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Notes

1. In a recent UK radio interview, the former police chief constable Tom Lloyd, who worked as a drug law enforcement officer for over 30 years, clearly stated that he was “completely against prohibition” advocating instead a reform of the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. The war on drugs had failed, so he maintained, valuable resources had been wasted which could have been better used for prevention, harm reduction and rehabilitation of those struggling with drug addiction. He perceived the war on drugs as a “war on people”, who were being criminalised and imprisoned instead of being given support. In his view, this achieved nothing but the stigmatisation and criminalisation of often young, vulnerable and troubled people—an attitude fostered by the media through their scaremongering—when what they really needed was society’s help (Interview with James O’Brien on LBC radio on 1 March 2016 at 11:30).
2. Ofcom created the harm and offence category for British television censorship to protect children and young adults from broadcasters’ programmes.
3. This is despite empirical evidence that heroin use is restricted to a very small group of the population in the USA, Australia and Europe (United Nations Office of Drugs & Crime, 2014).
4. The vast majority of these “heroin experience films” are produced in the USA. Hence, the focus of my analysis here will be predominantly on English language films.
5. Another group of films combine the above-mentioned motifs and elements typical of heroin narrative with the conventions of the biopic, the semi-biographical film about famous “real life” addicted artists or musical performers, such as Billy Holiday in *Lady sings the Blues* (Furie, 1972, USA) or Ray Charles in *Ray* (Hackford, 2004, USA). These narratives tend to motivate their protagonists’ need for heroin by the pressures of the creative process and the lifestyle of celebrities with the ready availability of drugs, while at the same time playing down the role heroin plays in their lives.
6. A film audience’s “emotional orientation” towards a film is also shaped by extradiegetic knowledge, e.g. by advertising or familiarity with the source novel. In the case of “junkie love” films, publicity and promotions (film posters and trailers) tend to raise genre expectations of “dark romance” foregrounding narrative elements and visual motifs of the central love relationship while downplaying the cause of the films’ “darkness”. For instance, the official US trailer for *Requiem for a Dream* opens with a quote from the source novel by Hubert Selby: “They held each other and kissed, and pushed each others’ darkness into the corner, believing in each others’ light, each others’ dream”.
7. With the exception of *Christiane F.*, the majority of heroin addiction films are based on semi-autobiographical novels by male authors.

8. Other examples of doomed screen lovers who break the law include—albeit not by drug taking and committing petty crime but by violence and murder—*You only live once* (Lang, 1937, USA), *Gun Crazy* (Lewis, 1950, USA), *Badlands* (Malick, 1973, USA) and *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994, USA).
9. Borrowed from Simmons’ title of her article about drug using couples in the “real world”.
10. For a detailed analysis of this unusual film based on the true story of a teenager’s heroin addiction (see Rinke, 2010).
11. As Greg Smith rightly stresses, “The text’s control of knowledge offers an invitation to the viewer to feel, although it cannot compel the viewer to do so” (p. 206).
12. O’Malley and Valverde (2004) criticise the fact that harm reduction campaigners, too, share with anti-drug advocates an overwhelming focus on risks and harms associated with substance use while ignoring entirely the force of pleasure that motivates it in the first place.

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