

# Fiends on screen

From the *Man with the Golden Arm* to *Trainspotting*, drugs have always created celluloid controversy. **David Griffin** whisks us through a century of drug users in the movies

**M**OST of us have I'm sure seen one of those American public education films where the term 'dope fiend' was used – probably accompanied by hysterical laughter from those viewing it. It's true the term 'dope fiend' was used for years as the term for an addict. What's more it was meant literally – it was truly believed that those addicted to the various morphine derivatives embodied the state of a demon. A handful of our Romantic era poets were some of the first documented dope fiends [or laudanum in their case] and although they experimented without the stigma of being criminalised, the British film *Pandaemonium* seems to indicate a downward spiral of insanity awaits, just a step beyond moderation.

## OPIUM

Call it synchronicity or chance – but the synthesis and manufacture of heroin and the birth and popularisation of cinema came within a few years of each other. By the 1920s a lethal cocktail of the Harrison Narcotic Act and prohibition driven by a religious temperance movement meant a gathering snowball of censorship and reform surrounded the popular new visual medium. Prior to this, America had been the ideal cultivation ground for an expanding drug culture. Hollywood's desire to provide a celluloid American dream was in stark contrast to the chaotic and indulgent lifestyles of its bankrollers and stars. A century of railroad industrialisation had brought with it a vast trade in opium from the East – in fact by 1905 it's estimated that around 10,000 opium dens were in operation around the country. Although not focused around the use of narcotics, Sergio Leone's epic *Once Upon A Time In America* had a profound impact on me when I first saw it – maybe some of this had to do with De Niro's trips to his local opium house. Although the theme never extends to addiction, the few scenes do give us a good feel for that hidden culture that 'Noodles' returned to regularly for a little time-out from the everyday.

In 1924, federal law made any use of heroin illegal. Within a decade, the Bureau of Narcotics

enthusiastically headed by one Harry J Anslinger had investigated some 50,000 users and 25,000 physicians. Combine this with Randolph Hearst's newspaper empire serving up the first ever tabloid style drug tales and you get a feel for just how difficult it had become to present drug use freely on screen. By the time the Second World War arrived a firm system of self-regulation stunted any progression of the drug movie and both Hollywood and Britain got used to pumping out state-sponsored, patriotic dross to the masses. Although a rather gritty portrayal of alcoholism arrived to Academy praise in 1945's *Lost Weekend*, it looked as if the industry had given in to mass hysteria with regards coverage of the more illicit side to life. Thankfully Otto Preminger changed this situation in 1955 when he cast Frank Sinatra in *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Sinatra plays a crooked card-dealer character fresh out of jail and rehab, who returns to his old environment with obvious results. Obvious in one sense maybe but at the time this film broke the mould and opened the door for film makers to show both realistic images and consequences of drug use once more. Preminger's film was one of the first of this field to tackle the newly formed ratings system and actually had its formal release delayed as the censors agreed on just how to 'regulate' images of hard drug use on the cinema screen.

## MASS MEDIA

As the beat generation and the hippies led us through the 60s and 70s – the definition of drugs and inevitably those that used them had to change. After all you could hardly be a 'drug fiend', society's scapegoat, when half the population was at it too. Mass consumption of television meant the home was no longer a refuge from someone else's imagery. Film recording equipment spread from privileged to masses and from corporation to the independent producer and of course the video format meant it was possible to bypass the process of scheduling your work at the movie theatre at all.

Although created in the latter years of the 20th century, two films set out to show addiction in a



Frank Sinatra in Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm*

post-1960s context. *The Basketball Diaries* is a rather rough adaptation of Jim Carroll's autobiographical book recording his experiences as a teenager in early 1960s New York City. Even given the more complex political and social setting of the era, the film resorts to the common ploy of installing larger than life characters and amplifying the 'showdown' style ending to deal with the fact that unless the addiction narrative weaves in a certain something 'other', it stands the risk of withdrawing into the mundane. Far superior is *Drugstore Cowboy*, which despite covering a rather linear plotline where Matt Dillon heads a group who raid pharmacy stashes, end up in trouble and addicted, we also get a sensitive yet darkly humorous look at the post-addiction struggle. Top this with one mumbling appearance by the late great William Burroughs and Gus van Sant's use of trippy images and you get one great movie.

**T**HE 1980s is remembered for the panic over home video possibly corrupting the nation's youth. Amongst drug film fans the highlight was *Christiane F.* A result of interviews carried out by two German journalists, it's as real, raw and gritty as it gets. It maps the transformation of a child heroin addict and prostitute from her descent into full-on addiction and subsequent attempts at getting clean. It's the fact this story is told from the perspective of someone so young exploring Berlin's underbelly and the way this aspect has been translated effectively to screen, that ensures *Christiane F.* a slot in narcotic film infamy. The 90s saw a huge amount of film releases which centred on drug use and addiction. Too many to mention, they include the surreal

detective-like narrative of *Naked Lunch*, the film version of Stahl's *Permanent Midnight*, *Rush* and *Bad Lieutenant* about crooked cops, *Blow* where Johnny Depp plays a rather greedy and screwed up dealer and a few pretty awful rehab films such as *28 Days*.

#### HEAD ON

The last decade saw a couple of major shifts in narcotic film history. *Traffic* was the first real attempt to tackle the issue of the war on drugs by demonstrating how it negatively affects everyone it touches. *Traffic* was based on a UK Channel 4 production that achieved huge ratings when first shown. The fact that in 50 years the media industry shifts from pandering to moral censors to questioning the very root of the subject could be seen as some sort of end-point. Secondly *Trainspotting* arrived and it was as if the life of an addict had become mainstream news – addiction became just left of trendy. In a way the censorship situation today mirrors the war on drugs itself – it's definitely there but it's pretty much ineffective when it comes to most production and virtually all consumption. In fact, having a few scenes of someone shooting up is probably more likely to get your film backed these days than anything else. Given the way *Trainspotting* succeeded, even a "carry on up the hypodermic" (as the journalist and ex-heroin user Will Self called *Trainspotting*) film will provide all concerned with a launch-pad to success and a place in drugged-up celluloid history. ●

David Griffin works at Cambridgeshire-based UserActive. david@utopiaded.net

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