



Glamorization or Condemnation: The Accuracy of Hollywood's Portrayal of Heroin Use in Motion Pictures in the 1990's

Citation

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Glamorization or Condemnation: The Accuracy of Hollywood's Portrayal of Heroin Use in Motion Pictures in the 1990's

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Submitted March 2004 in Satisfaction of the Course Requirement

Abstract

The United States saw a dramatic increase in heroin use during the 1990's. During that same time, heroin references in popular music, movies, and fashion became increasingly common. This paper seeks to examine two aspects of the portrayal of heroin use in ten movies released between 1994 and 2000. First, the accuracy of the depiction of heroin use is analyzed to see if the depiction of heroin use by Hollywood reflects the realities of heroin use in the United States during that same time period. Second, the paper examines

whether or not these ten movies show heroin use in a positive or glamorous manner. In general, the heroin-using characters in the ten movies are predominantly white, middle-class or upper middle-class males in their twenties. Minorities and women are underrepresented as heroin users in the movies according to available statistics about heroin use in the United States. Contributing to the glamour of heroin, the movies tend to emphasize the euphoric effects of heroin while omitting the negative, or less desired, pharmacological effects of heroin. Similarly, withdrawal is not accurately portrayed in any of the movies. While many of the films downplay the negative pharmacological effects of heroin, a few of the movies did focus on the negative social effects that heroin has on the characters' interpersonal relationships. Only a few movies depicted the serious health and legal consequences of using heroin. The least glamorous portrayal of heroin use in many of the movies derived from the manner in which the heroin-using characters financed their heroin addictions. In several movies, crime as well as prostitution was used to financially support the heroin addiction of the characters.

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in the 1990's

In the 1990's, there was a significant increase in the use of heroin in the United States.¹ It is estimated that, in 1999, approximately three million Americans over the age of twelve years had used heroin at least once

¹FORD ET AL., FORD: CLINICAL TOXICOLOGY 628 (2001).

in their lifetime and that 403,000 people had used heroin in the past year.² In that same year, the number of new heroin users was estimated at 104,000.³

While the number of heroin users was growing in the 1990's, the average age of heroin users was decreasing. In 1997, 87% of new heroin users were under the age of twenty-six as compared to 61% in 1992.⁴ In fact, the average age of heroin use in 1995 was nineteen years of age as compared with an average age of twenty-seven in 1988.⁵ There was a particularly significant increase in heroin use among junior high and high school students.⁶ In fact, the number of junior high school and high school students using heroin was two to three times higher in 1999 than it was in 1991.⁷ Over 3% of high school students in 2001 report using heroin during their lifetimes.⁸ Amazingly, almost 28% of high school seniors have said that heroin is fairly easy or very easy to obtain.⁹

An obvious question to ask is what prompted this increase in heroin usage in the 1990's. In the 1990's, heroin re-entered the popular conscience through the media. Movies, music, and fashion all began containing increasing heroin references. In popular music, songs from several artists from Cracker to the Red Hot Chili Peppers contained references to heroin use.¹⁰ Additionally, many of the most popular rock stars in the 1990's were known heroin users including Kurt Cobain and Scott Weiland.¹¹

²Eugene P. Schoener et al., *Injection Drug Use in North America*, 16 *Infectious Disease Clinics of North America* 535, 541-542 (2002).

³U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, *Heroin*, at http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/concern/heroin_factsheet.html (last visited March 3, 2004).

⁴National Institute on Drug Abuse, *Research Report Series—Heroin Abuse and Addiction*, at <http://www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/Heroin/heroin2.html#what> (last modified December 30, 2004).

⁵Donald E. Greydanus & Dilip R. Patel, *Substance Abuse in Adolescents: A Complex Conundrum for the Clinician*, 50 *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 1179, 1206 (2003).

⁶FORD ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 628.

⁷Greydanus & Patel, *supra* note 5, at 1181.

⁸Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Heroin*, at <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/heroin/index.html>.

⁹*Id.*

¹⁰Cracker, *Low*, on KEROSENE HAT (Virgin Records 1993); Red Hot Chili Peppers, *Under the Bridge*, on BLOOD SUGAR SEX MAGIC (Warner Bros. 1991); Nine Inch Nails, *Hurt*, on THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL (Interscope Records 1994); Everclear, *Heroin Girl*, on SPARKLE AND FADE (Capitol 1995); The Cranberries, *Salvation*, on TO THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED (Polygram Records 1996).

¹¹Scott Weiland of Stone Temple Pilots was arrested for heroin possession. CNN, *Scott Weiland Released from Jail After Five Days*, at <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/News/9901/21/showbuzz/index.html> (January 21, 1999); Kurt Cobain of Nirvana was well known to use heroin. Bill Wyman, *Kurt Cobain and a Dream About Pop*, at <http://dir.salon.com/ent/music/feature/2001/09/24/cobain/index.html?sid=1048491> (September 24, 2001).

In fashion, the term “heroin chic” was coined in the 1990’s to describe the thin, emaciated models that often appear in women’s magazines. This “heroin chic” look dominated the model scene in the 1990’s. The resurgence of heroin in popular culture became so prevalent that even President Clinton addressed the issue in 1997 decriing the glamorization of heroin by the fashion industry and elsewhere in popular culture in light of the increasing use of heroin in the United States.¹²

Although there are probably many factors that might have led to an increase in heroin use in the 1990’s, this paper seeks to examine the portrayal of heroin use in movies during the 1990’s as such portrayals can affect the perception of the risks and benefits of heroin use. This paper examines ten movies released between 1994 and 2000 for the accuracy of their portrayal of heroin use. The ten movies can be divided into two categories, mainstream and independent, based on the popularity of the films. The mainstream movie category includes two types of movies. The first are the typical, high budget films released by major studios. These include *Gridlock’d*¹³, *Traffic*¹⁴, *Pulp Fiction*¹⁵, and *Bringing Out the Dead*¹⁶. The second are smaller budget films that entered the American consciousness by achieving a significant threshold of popularity. These include *Trainspotting*¹⁷ and *Requiem for a Dream*¹⁸.

The independent movies were smaller budget movies that did not reach the same threshold of popularity as *Trainspotting* or *Requiem for a Dream*. The movies in this category included *The Basketball Diaries*¹⁹,

¹²Bill Clinton, Excerpt from a Speech, at <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/05/21/fdch/clinton/index2.html> (1997).

¹³GRIDLOCK’D (PolyGram Film Entertainment & Interscope Communications 1997).

¹⁴TRAFFIC (Bedford Falls Productions & Compulsion Inc. 2000).

¹⁵PULP FICTION (A Band Apart & Miramax Films 1994).

¹⁶BRINGING OUT THE DEAD (Paramount Pictures and Touchstone Pictures 1999).

¹⁷TRAINSPOTTING (Channel Four Films & PolyGram Entertainment 1996)

¹⁸REQUIEM FOR A DREAM (Artisan Entertainment & Bandeira Entertainment 2000).

¹⁹THE BASKETBALL DIARIES (Island Pictures & New Line Cinema 1995).

*Killing Zoe*²⁰, *Permanent Midnight*²¹, and *Basquiat*²². Interestingly, whereas all of the mainstream movies were fictional accounts, all of the independent films other than *Killing Zoe* were based on true stories.

This paper will examine seven aspects of heroin use as portrayed in major motion pictures released between 1994 and 2000, a time period in which the United States saw a significant increase in heroin use. Part I of this paper will provide a general background as to the movies that have been studied. The context in which heroin is used in these motion pictures is analyzed in Part II. Part III will discuss the pharmacological effects of heroin that are portrayed in the movies. The social effects of heroin use on the lives of the characters that use heroin will be explored in part IV. The portrayal of withdrawal from heroin is the subject of part V. Part VI will examine how the characters in the movies finance their heroin addiction. Part VII will discuss the legal and health consequences of heroin use that are depicted in the ten movies.

Part I: The Motion Pictures

This paper examines ten films released between 1994 and 2000. Each film depicts heroin use or the effects of heroin use. Having general knowledge of the movies will help provide a background understanding of the characters and the situations portrayed in the films. This will assist in analyzing the portrayal of heroin use in these films by understanding the circumstances in which the characters used heroin. The following are brief explanations of each of the films that will be discussed in this paper.

Traffic is a movie about the illicit drug industry in the United States. It examines the issue from three

²⁰KILLING ZOE (Davis-Films & Live Entertainment 1994).

²¹PERMANENT MIDNIGHT (JD Productions 1998).

²²BASQUIAT (Eleventh Street Production & Miramax Films 1996).

perspectives. The first is a political angle told from the perspective of an incoming drug czar in Washington, DC. The second angle is from the drug user standpoint focusing on the daughter of the drug czar and her high school friends. The third perspective is that of the Mexican law enforcement officials. The film shows the connections of Mexican law enforcement and military personnel to the drug trade in Mexico.

Trainspotting tells the story of a group of young, Scottish men in their twenties who use heroin. The main character, Renton, attempts to get off of heroin several times. However, his friends do little to help him kick his habit. The movie depicts the consequences of drug use on the lives of these young men. Renton is eventually able to kick his heroin habit and move on with his life while his friends take different paths.

Pulp Fiction tells a variety of stories surrounding a crime syndicate. The main heroin-using character, Vincent Vega, is an enforcer for the crime syndicate. Vincent uses heroin intravenously at his drug dealer's house.

Requiem for a Dream tells the tale of three friends. Harry and Marion have an intimate relationship. The third main character, Tyrone, is Harry's friend. They are all heroin addicts and spend most of the movie trying to obtain heroin to support their habit. They go to great lengths out of their desperation to get the next "fix" of heroin. Each of the three characters ends up paying a large price for their heroin addiction.

Bringing Out the Dead tells the story of a paramedic in New York City who is having difficulty in dealing with the realities of his job. In one scene, he responds to a heroin overdose at a Manhattan nightclub.

Gridlock'd is the story of two friends and jazz musicians named Stretch and Spoon. After another member of their band overdoses on heroin and is hospitalized for several days, Stretch and Spoon decide to try to quit their heroin habit by entering into a treatment program. Throughout the movie, they face several difficulties from angry drug dealers, the police, and social services agencies as they attempt to break through the bureaucracy to enter a rehabilitation program.

The Basketball Diaries tells the story of Jim Carroll who wrote the book on which the movie was based. At the beginning of the movie, Jim is a star basketball player and an avid writer. Jim and his friends are in high school when they begin using heroin. After being thrown out of school and his mother's apartment, Jim begins to live on the streets with his friends. As a consequence of his heroin use, Jim loses his chance to play college basketball. Jim also finds that his writing suffers while he is on heroin. His heroin addiction becomes the controlling force in his life. The movie shows the consequences of heroin use for Jim and his friends.

Basquiat tells the story of Jean Michel Basquiat who began his career as a graffiti artist in New York City. Once he begins painting, Jean Michel Basquiat becomes noticed by the art world. His popularity and critical acclaim as an artist makes him famous and wealthy. However, while his fame is increasing, Jean Michel Basquiat develops a heroin addiction and dies of a heroin overdose before turning thirty years of age.

Permanent Midnight is an autobiographical tale of Jerry Stahl. Jerry goes to Los Angeles to become a writer. With his wife's help, Jerry gets a job as a writer for a television sitcom. However, Jerry develops a serious heroin addiction that ends up costing him several jobs, his marriage, and visitation with his child.

Killing Zoe is the story of an American, named Zed, who returns to see an old friend in Paris to participate in a bank robbery. On the night before committing the bank robbery, Zed and his partners in crime engage in a massive amount of drug use including a considerable amount of heroin use throughout the evening. Zed and his partners then attempt to rob a French bank the next day.

Part II: The Context of Heroin Use in Movies in the 1990's

The context of heroin use comprises several different inquiries. The first inquiry is who is using heroin in the movies? When all ten of the movies are analyzed, a very distinct pattern appears. *Trainspotting* portrays a group of twenty-something white, males from middle class families who used heroin. *Requiem for a Dream* recounts the tale of three heroin users—a white male, a white female, and a black male. All three of the characters are in their twenties and from middle class families. *Gridlock's* also tells the story of three heroin users. All three again appear to be in their twenties. In slight contrast to *Requiem for a Dream*, the heroin-using characters in *Gridlock'd* consist of a black male, a black female, and a white male. In *Traffic*, the main heroin users are white suburban teenagers, males and females, who attend a private high school in the suburbs and come from wealthy families. The heroin user in *Bringing Out the Dead* is a white male in his twenties at a New York City nightclub. *The Basketball Diaries* tells the tale of three high school boys from middle class families in upper Manhattan who become involved with heroin. *Basquiat* depicts the story of black, male artist in his twenties who begins using heroin as he becomes famous. The heroin users in *Killing Zoe* are white males in their late twenties. *Permanent Midnight* recounts the story of a white, upper middle-class male in his twenties who develops a heavy heroin addiction.

Therefore, the aforementioned movies seem to reveal significant trends in terms of the characters that are being portrayed using heroin. Overwhelmingly, the users of heroin in these movies were young, white, male, and in their twenties. In all of the movies that provided information on family background, the heroin users were from middle-class or upper middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds.

The question is whether the movies reflect the reality of the demographics of heroin use in this country. In terms of sex, males account for about 67% of heroin users in the United States.²³ Females obviously account for the other 33%.²⁴ Out of the ten movies that were researched, six of them, four mainstream and two independent, feature at least one woman using heroin. In contrast, all ten of the movies feature men using heroin. Even though female characters who use heroin appear in six of the ten movies, women characters still represent only about 25% of all heroin users shown in total in all ten of the films. Interestingly, 29% of the heroin-using characters are female in the mainstream movies as opposed to only 20% in the independent movies. However, in any particular movie, anywhere between 0 to 50% of the heroin-using characters were female.

Overall, it appears that female heroin users are slightly underrepresented in the ten films. The mainstream movies actually portray women using heroin more often than the independent films. This could be a function of three of the four independent films being based on true stories focusing on male heroin abusers.

While an increasing amount, in fact the vast majority, of new heroin users are under the age of twenty-six years²⁵, the majority of heroin users in the United States, about 55%, are believed to be older than thirty-five years of age.²⁶ The number of heroin users in both groups, those over and under thirty-five years of age, seems to be growing.²⁷ The ten movies selected for analysis all focus on heroin users below the age

²³Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 543-44.

²⁴*Id.*

²⁵*Id.*

²⁶*Id.*

²⁷From 1999 to 2000, a government study showed an increase in the size of this group by 11%. Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 543-44. In the same time period, heroin users aged eighteen to twenty-five demonstrated an increase of 22%. *Id.*

of thirty-five. The youngest heroin users depicted were teenagers in *Traffic* and *The Basketball Diaries*. The remaining movies seemed to focus on heroin users in their twenties. Thus, the movies seem to focus exclusively on a younger age demographic when depicting heroin use.

The breakdown of heroin users in the United States by race reveals that 42% of heroin users are Caucasian, 32% are African-American, and 15% are Hispanic. In the ten movies, the vast majority of heroin-using characters were Caucasian. Approximately 81% of the heroin users depicted in all ten movies were Caucasian. In contrast, only about 6% of the heroin-using characters shown in all ten movies were Hispanic. African-American heroin users accounted for 12% of the total heroin-using characters in the ten movies.

For mainstream movies, the breakdown of heroin-using characters by race is 82% Caucasian, 18% African-American, and 0% Hispanic. For independent films, the breakdown by race is 80% Caucasian, 7% African-American, and 13% Hispanic. While Caucasians are vastly overrepresented as heroin users in movies at almost twice the rate at which they are found in the United States, minorities in general were vastly underrepresented as heroin users in the ten movies released between 1994 and 2000. While the percentage of Hispanic characters who use heroin is close to the demographic data in the independent films, the mainstream films contained not one Hispanic character using heroin.

While the use of heroin among the population can be found at all socioeconomic levels, the largest proportion of heroin users are of a lower socioeconomic status.²⁸ All of the heroin users portrayed in the ten movies started out in middle class or upper-middle class backgrounds. The only possible exception is *The Basketball Diaries* where the high school-aged characters were living in the streets and supporting their addiction. However, even the characters in *The Basketball Diaries* grew up in middle class families and attended a private Catholic school. Even when criminals were portrayed using heroin, the criminals tended to be fairly wealthy as in *Killing Zoe* and *Pulp Fiction*. Thus, the ten movies can be said to depict a certain

²⁸ *Id.*

subpopulation of heroin users, mainly those from the middle and upper-middle class.

Another interesting thing to note about who is doing heroin in the movies is the successful lives of some of the characters. Jean Michel Basquiat was a famous and celebrated artist living in New York. The main character in *Traffic*, a high school girl, is a straight A student, in student government, on the math team, on the volleyball team, and a volunteer to read to the blind. Surely, she is a very successful student. Similarly, despite his difficulties, the main character in *Permanent Midnight* is a successful Hollywood writer while using heroin until his addiction became too overwhelming. Interestingly, Jim Carroll, the main character in *The Basketball Diaries*, went on, after his addiction, to become a writer, poet, and musician. This is shown briefly at the end of the movie.

The second inquiry in analyzing the context in which heroin use is shown concerns where the heroin was used. In seven of the ten movies, heroin use is predominantly in a house or apartment. These movies included *Trainspotting*, *Traffic*, *Killing Zoe*, *Gridlock'd*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Basquiat*, and *Permanent Midnight*. *Permanent Midnight* and *Traffic* show characters using heroin in beautiful, expensive homes. Conversely, the characters in *Trainspotting* use heroin in a bare apartment with little furniture besides a few mattresses on the floor. The remaining apartments and houses are furnished in a manner similar to most middle class homes.

Houses and apartments are not the only places where heroin use is depicted. *Killing Zoe* and *Bringing Out the Dead* feature the use of heroin in public at bars or nightclubs. *The Basketball Diaries* depict the use of heroin in the streets and abandoned buildings. Of the ten films, it is the only movie to show a “shooting gallery,” which is a place where many heroin users get together to use heroin, share drug paraphernalia,

and trade sex for drugs.²⁹ *Permanent Midnight*, *Killing Zoe*, and *Basquiat* all feature the use of heroin in automobiles. *Permanent Midnight*, *Gridlock'd*, and *Killing Zoe* also depict the use of heroin in public bathrooms outside of the home.

The third inquiry in considering the context of heroin use is what route of administration is utilized. It is important to discuss the realities of heroin use to see if those realities are portrayed in the movies. Although injection of heroin remains the major route of administration for heroin users, snorting and smoking heroin have gained in popularity.³⁰ Smoking heroin often comes in conjunction with other drug use such as the lacing of marijuana cigarettes with heroin.³¹ Although, inhaling the fumes from smoking heroin, called “chasing the dragon,” is another route of administration by itself.³²

Snorting heroin has seen the largest increase in popularity in the 1990's.³³ Snorting as a route of administration probably increased for many reasons. First, it is more palatable to snort than to inject for many potential users. Second, the purity of heroin has increased to the point where snorting has become an option.³⁴ Third, the pharmacokinetics of snorting heroin is not radically different from that of injection. Whereas the euphoria, described as the “rush,” peaks within one minute for injection use of heroin, the peak effect for nasal administration of heroin is about three to five minutes.³⁵ Therefore, it is an effective and quick way to achieve a similar high from heroin use. Fourth, the evidence of use decreases due to the absence of track marks, which are seen at injection sites on the body injection drug users. Fifth, the health risks from snorting

²⁹*Id.* at 539.

³⁰National Institute on Drug Abuse, *supra* note 4.

³¹FORD ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 629.

³²*Id.*

³³National Institute on Drug Abuse, *supra* note 4.

³⁴*Id.*

³⁵FORD ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 629.

heroin are less. Because needle sharing is not a problem, the nasal administration of heroin can decrease the risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis, and other such infection risks from injection.³⁶ Additionally, the risk of skin infections is reduced by not using needles to inject the drug.

Despite the increase in popularity of the nasal route of administration, the majority of heroin use in the United States still occurs through the intravenous route of administration.³⁷ Although it is not unusual to begin heroin use through non-invasive routes of administration, most heroin users progress toward intravenous use of heroin for one of many reasons.³⁸ The first is economic.³⁹ Using heroin intravenously maximizes the cost-effectiveness of the drug because a smaller amount of heroin can be used to achieve the same pharmacological effect. The second reason is for the pharmacological effect of intravenous use which provides the fastest onset of effect and most intense “rush.”⁴⁰ The third reason is social. Intravenous use is surrounded by a specific ritual of the heroin culture.⁴¹ The use of the word “ritual” is a reference to the full process of intravenous drug use which encompasses many discrete steps. Such a ritual can indoctrinate the person into the subculture of heroin users.⁴²

Reflecting the popularity of intravenous heroin use, nine of the ten movies featured the use of heroin intravenously. Only *Bringing Out the Dead* did not. Snorting heroin is depicted in *Requiem for a Dream*, *Bringing Out the Dead*, *The Basketball Diaries*, *Basquiat*, and *Killing Zoe*. The inhaling of heroin fumes, called chasing the dragon, was shown in *Traffic* and *Killing Zoe*. None of the movies depicted the smoking of heroin laced marijuana joints or other such methods of use.

Several films show the ritual of intravenous drug use in detail. In *Pulp Fiction*, the main character, Vincent,

³⁶Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 536.

³⁷Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 536.

³⁸*Id.* at 536-37.

³⁹*Id.*

⁴⁰*Id.*

⁴¹*Id.*

⁴²Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 536-37.

has a leather carrying case containing all of the supplies that one needs for intravenous drug use. There is dramatic slow motion depiction of the injection process. Vincent begins the process by liquefying the heroin by holding a lighter under a spoon containing the heroin. After pulling the heroin into the syringe, the movie shows Vincent putting the needle into his arm, pulling back on the plunger resulting in blood being sucked up into the syringe, and then pushing down on the plunger injecting the heroin into his vein. Showing the whole ritual of intravenous drug use in slow motion only seems to make the process more dramatic and visually interesting than it would appear if the intravenous use is shown in real time.

The ritual of intravenous heroin use is shown in a different but equally interesting manner in *Requiem for a Dream*. Rather than showing the ritual in slow motion to dramatize the ritual, *Requiem for a Dream* shows a rapid sequence of close-up images including a pupil constricting, a needle injecting the heroin, a spoon, and the flame from a lighter underneath the spoon. By providing the fast sequence of images, the movie gives a sense of the rush surrounding the injection of heroin. This is a stark contrast to the slow motion, dramatized portrayal of the ritual of intravenous drug use as seen in *Pulp Fiction*.

The three other movies that show the entire ritual are *Permanent Midnight*, *The Basketball Diaries*, and *Trainspotting*. All of these movies show the ritual in real time without any special camera tricks. Other movies such as *Killing Zoe*, *Gridlock'd*, and *Traffic* just show the actual injection without the full ritual that precedes it.

Part III: The Pharmacological Effects of Heroin Portrayed in Motion Pictures

What are the pharmacological effects of heroin? Heroin is a semi-synthetic derivative of the poppy plant which produces opium.⁴³ Heroin is in a class of pharmaceutical compounds referred to as opiates.⁴⁴ Heroin, like all opiates, acts pharmacologically on the body by activating several types of opiate receptors which are naturally found in the central and peripheral nervous systems of the human body.⁴⁵ Opiate receptors are naturally present in all humans because the human body makes chemicals that normally interact with these receptors such as endorphins.⁴⁶ The body adjusts very quickly to heroin use. Therefore, individuals who use heroin rapidly develop tolerance to the drug.⁴⁷

Heroin has many effects on the human body. For the purposes of this paper, the pharmacological and physiological effects of heroin are not as important as the visible manifestations of heroin use. This is because movies can simply show the visible manifestations. Heroin affects several body systems including the nervous system, the respiratory system, and the skin. Heroin causes the user to experience flushing and itching of the skin.⁴⁸ Constriction of the pupils is another pharmacological effect of heroin.⁴⁹ In addition to euphoria, users of heroin can also experience dysphoria⁵⁰ Nausea and vomiting are common during heroin intoxication due to a reaction in the brain.⁵¹ Heroin also causes fluctuations in the level of consciousness from mild sedation to coma.⁵² Due to the effect of heroin on the central nervous system, patients will often experience a decreased breathing rate, which can result in hypoxia and even death.⁵³ In fact, this decreased

⁴³FORD ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 627.

⁴⁴*Id.*

⁴⁵*Id.*

⁴⁶*Id.*

⁴⁷*Id.*

⁴⁸FORD ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 628.

⁴⁹*Id.*

⁵⁰*Id.* at 629-30.

⁵¹*Id.*

⁵²*Id.*

⁵³FORD ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 629-30.

breathing rate is often the cause of death in cases of overdose.⁵⁴

One pharmacological effect that was depicted in every single movie was that of euphoria. All of the movies showed people using heroin with a joyful or content expression. However, several of the films went further and either described the high through narration or through abstract visual interpretations.

Trainspotting is narrated from the point of view of the main character, Renton. The narration emphasizes the feeling of euphoria when describing heroin use. Renton's narration explains that the reason that the group uses heroin is for the pleasurable feeling that the drug causes. They use it as an escape from having to face life and difficult decisions. Renton's narration describes the rush from heroin use in an interesting manner. Renton describes the euphoria by saying that, if you take the best orgasm you have ever had and multiply it by 1000, you are still nowhere close to the euphoric feeling derived from intravenous heroin use.

The Basketball Diaries used both narration and visual imagery to convey the feeling of euphoria derived from intravenous heroin use. In one scene, the narration of Jim Carroll, the main character, describes the feeling of injecting heroin as a long, heat wave running through his body. Jim further describes the euphoria from heroin use as flushing out all of the aches, sadness, pain, and guilt that he experiences in his life. As the narration continues, the movie shows Jim Carroll running through a field of pink flowers while laughing and smiling. This was an attempt to visually depict the euphoria that is experienced as a result of intravenous heroin use.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

All of the movies, except for *Gridlock'd*, also depict the varied levels of consciousness that are induced by heroin. Some films emphasize this point more than others. *Killing Zoe* uses camera techniques to give the impression of the dream-like state that results when heroin is used. *Trainspotting* clearly shows the varying levels of consciousness among the different heroin users when the characters intravenously use heroin as a group. *Permanent Midnight* and *The Basketball Diaries* also show the impaired level of consciousness following heroin use in scenes where consciousness can vary from catatonic to slightly sedated.

Only *Permanent Midnight* and *The Basketball Diaries* show the nausea and vomiting reaction to heroin. The main character in *The Basketball Diaries* describes a heat wave running through his body after injecting heroin. This refers to the flushing of the skin that occurs with heroin use. Constriction of the pupils is shown in only one movie, *Requiem for a Dream*. Similarly, *Permanent Midnight* is the only movie to portray the symptom of dysphoria that can occur with heroin use. Amazingly, *Gridlock'd* shows none of the pharmacological effects of heroin other than euphoria.

The ten movies tend to emphasize the euphoria and altered levels of consciousness while not addressing many of the other signs and symptoms of heroin use. The remaining signs and symptoms such as vomiting, flushing, and dysphoria are each depicted in only one or two movies. Even within the movies that depict these symptoms, such signs and symptoms are only shown once as compared to euphoria which is depicted multiple times in each movie. In the end, the motion pictures tend to emphasize the positive effects of heroin, such as euphoria, over the negative effects, such as vomiting and dysphoria.

Part IV: The Social Effects of Heroin Use in the Lives of the Characters

One of the marks of drug abuse is that the use of the drug affects the interpersonal relationships of the user.⁵⁵ These interpersonal relationships are usually with non-users. Heroin users tend to have a different relationship with the people with whom they use heroin. In the medical literature, there is the idea that injection drug use is a social behavior.⁵⁶ Intravenous drug users usually have a network of users providing social support.⁵⁷ While members of the networks can come and go, there is a strong relationship to behavior depending on the number of people in the network and on the closeness of the interpersonal relationships within the network.⁵⁸ More frequent use has been correlated to closer interpersonal relationships within the networks.⁵⁹ Additionally, the frequency of use increases with the number of people in the network.⁶⁰ Networks serve as a way to sustain use and barter for goods and services such as drugs and sex.⁶¹

In *Killing Zoe*, drug use promotes the bond of friendship between the participants. This is consistent with the network conception of heroin addiction. Because the movie takes place over two days, the movie did not depict any long term social consequences as a result of heroin use.

The main character, a heroin addict, in *Permanent Midnight* suffers several social consequences as a result of his addiction. First, his drug use is responsible for him losing several jobs. Second, his heroin use led to a divorce from his wife. Third, the heroin addiction resulted in the main character receiving very limited visitation of his child who was living with his former wife and her new husband. Additionally, his drug use

⁵⁵LEE GOLDMAN & J. CLAUDE BENNETT, CECIL TEXTBOOK OF MEDICINE 54 (21st Ed. 2000).

⁵⁶Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 538.

⁵⁷*Id.*

⁵⁸*Id.*

⁵⁹*Id.*

⁶⁰*Id.*

⁶¹Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 538.

seemed to result in the deterioration of his relationship with friends and co-workers.

The main character's heroin addiction in *Permanent Midnight* becomes so bad that he intravenously uses heroin in his car while his infant is lying in the seat next to him. While driving under the influence of heroin with his child in the car, he is stopped by the police. The police see that the child is neglected and call the Department of Child and Family Services to come and take the child away from him. This scene, which shows the neglect of the child, serves to further demonstrate the loss of responsibility and proper social behavior that is induced by heroin addiction.

The bond between four of the five young men in *Trainspotting* is based on their heroin use. It is a shared experience. When the main character, Renton, is sober, he wants little to do with the friends with whom he had taken heroin. Heroin is what seemed to hold their friendship together. This type of bond between the men using heroin is typical of the network conception of intravenous drug use.

As in *Permanent Midnight*, *Trainspotting* also shows heroin use leading to child neglect. In some of the scenes where the men were shooting up, a woman, Alison, and her baby are present. Alison uses heroin intravenously along with the men. While they are using heroin in one scene, the men hear Alison screaming. She had found her baby dead in its crib. The child was blue and obviously neglected while Alison and the men were using heroin. This scene, as the one in *Permanent Midnight*, depicts the risk of child neglect that occurs when parents use heroin.

Renton's other relationships did not seem to be adversely affected by his heroin use. Renton's relationship with his parents, for instance, did not seem to suffer as a result of his heroin use. However, Renton's parents

were concerned and tried to help cure his addiction.

In *The Basketball Diaries*, the heroin user is much younger than the other movies. The main heroin-using characters are all teenagers. Subsequent to his drug use, the main character, Jim, and two of his friends get kicked out of school. After getting kicked out of school, Jim loses his chance at playing college basketball. His mother ends up throwing him out of her apartment as a result of his addiction. Jim is shown living on the street for the next few years. Even while living on the street, the three friends remain on good terms and try to look out for each other. They assist each other in obtaining heroin throughout the movie. This again shows the basic network of intravenous heroin users, which helps to sustain the heroin addiction of the characters.

In *Basquiat*, the heroin addiction of Jean Michel Basquiat did affect his relationship with his friends. The friends that he had before beginning heroin use would no longer hang around him once he became famous and his addiction grew. Several of his friends attempted to talk to him about getting off of heroin with little success. *Basquiat* does not show much of the social network in which he did the drugs. Despite the fact that Basquiat died of a heroin overdose, the movie downplays its role in his life. This might be due to the bias of the filmmaker who was a personal friend of Jean Michel Basquiat.

In *Traffic*, the main character using heroin, a high school student, seems to bond with her friends while using the drug. Her friends are her network. She does have some problems with her parents over her drug use until they convince her to go to rehabilitation. Surprisingly, she appears to have no problems at school as a result of her drug use.

In *Requiem for a Dream*, problems arise in the relationship between Harry and Marion, who have an intimate relationship in the movie. Both characters use heroin. Fights arise between Marion and Harry as a result of the difficulty of obtaining heroin. However, the use of heroin does not seem to affect the friendship between Tyrone and Harry who seek to buy, sell, and use heroin together. Harry's heroin habit does affect his relationship with his mother who is sometimes scared of him. In one scene, she locks herself in the bathroom while Harry is in the apartment even though Harry is yelling for her to come out and talk to him. Tyrone, Marion, and Harry are in the same network and support each other's heroin addiction. They work together throughout the movie in order to get the money to buy heroin. They also share heroin with each other. This is a good example of a network helping to sustain the addiction by increasing the collective resources of the individuals in obtaining heroin.

The heroin use in *Pulp Fiction* did not seem to result in any negative social consequences for Vincent Vega, the character who used heroin in the movie. His relationship with his fellow criminal associates remained stable. Similarly, *Bringing Out the Dead* did not show any social consequences of heroin use. This was mainly because *Bringing Out the Dead* was focused on the paramedics and not the patients or actual users of the drugs. *Gridlock'd* similarly did not show any social consequences of heroin use other than the network of the three main characters who used their collective resources to obtain and use heroin.

Part V: The Depiction of Withdrawal

In addition to being psychologically addictive, heroin is extremely physically addictive. Following the cessa-

tion of heroin use, withdrawal can start within eight to sixteen hours.⁶² The withdrawal period from heroin lasts between 5 and 8 days with symptoms reaching a peak at thirty-six to seventy-two hours.⁶³ The symptoms of withdrawal include salivation, tearing, vomiting, runny nose, diarrhea, nausea, chills, and diffuse body pain.⁶⁴ The withdrawal, although clearly unpleasant, is not life threatening.⁶⁵

Only two of the movies, *Trainspotting* and *The Basketball Diaries*, show full withdrawal from heroin. In *Trainspotting*, the main character, Renton, attempts twice to get off of heroin by going “cold turkey,” which means stopping heroin use altogether and going through full withdrawal. In the first attempt, Renton, the main character, plans to lock himself in a room which he would not leave until his withdrawal has finished. Renton makes several preparations before beginning withdrawal. He purchases soothing music, soup, ice cream, water, and valium. Renton makes sure to have a television in the room to keep himself busy. He also has three buckets in the room for vomit, feces, and urine. Although heroin withdrawal lasts a week, this length of time was not conveyed to the viewer of the withdrawal scene. This scene in the film primarily focused on Renton’s preparation for withdrawal and did not depict much of the actual withdrawal. Yet, the buckets, for instance, did provide the viewer with an indication that some of the symptoms including vomiting and diarrhea.

The second scene of heroin withdrawal in *Trainspotting* occurs after his parents take him home from the hospital where he ended up after taking a large dose of heroin. His parents decide that they are going to help their son quit using heroin by locking him in his room while he went through withdrawal. Renton, as narrator, describes the feeling of withdrawal as being too ill to sleep and too tired to stay awake. Renton

⁶²Anthony S. Fauci et al., HARRISON’S PRINCIPLES OF INTERNAL MEDICINE 2510 (1998).

⁶³*Id.*

⁶⁴*Id.*

⁶⁵*Id.*

appears very uncomfortable in this scene. It was obvious that he was experiencing some degree of pain. Much of this withdrawal scene focused on Renton's nightmares involving other characters in the movie. The only other scene of full-scale withdrawal from heroin is in *The Basketball Diaries*. In that movie, the main character, Jim, undergoes withdrawal at a friend's apartment. This scene depicts several symptoms of withdrawal. Jim experiences a runny nose, sweating, and chills. Jim is shown writhing in pain during the initial stages of withdrawal. The scene conveys the impression that the withdrawal occurred over several days. By the end of the withdrawal scene, Jim begins to look significantly better.

In addition to the previous two movies, *Requiem for a Dream* and *Permanent Midnight* depict the beginnings of withdrawal when addicts get anxious for a "fix" of heroin to prevent full-scale withdrawal. Because the heroin-using characters in these movies always obtain the "fix" that they need, full-scale withdrawal is never shown. Interestingly, six of the movies never show any kind of withdrawal whatsoever giving the appearance that there are little physical consequences from ceasing heroin use.

Even though two movies did attempt to show withdrawal from heroin, neither one depicted the full range of symptoms. *The Basketball Diaries* depicted chills, sweating, and pain. *Trainspotting* also showed pain during withdrawal while hinting at, but not depicting, the symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea. Many of the symptoms of withdrawal were shown between both of the movies. However, a scene which actually portrayed all of the aforementioned symptoms would be a more accurate portrayal of what a person undergoing heroin withdrawal experiences. Both movies, by only showing a few symptoms and not accurately conveying the duration of withdrawal, give the impression that heroin withdrawal is much less severe and unpleasant than is actually the case.

Part VI: Financing a Heroin Habit

The heroin-addicted characters in these ten movies have several ways of financing their drug habit. In two films, *Basquiat* and *Permanent Midnight*, the heroin addicts finance their heroin addiction by working. The main character in *Permanent Midnight* is a writer for television shows in Los Angeles. Jean Michel Basquiat is a painter in the movie who earns money selling his art. These are the only two movies that demonstrated addicts financing their heroin addiction through legitimate work. In contrast, the characters in *Trainspotting* purposely avoid getting jobs so that they can stay on government welfare rolls and receive money to finance their heroin habit.

Another manner in which addicts can finance their habit is by selling possessions. In *Requiem for a Dream*, Harry would sell his mother's television in order to get money to buy heroin. His mother would then proceed to buy the television back from the man to whom Harry had sold it. This cycle is repeated multiple times. In *Traffic*, the main heroin- using character, a high school girl, sells a video camera and a gun from her parent's house to get money to purchase heroin. Similarly, in *Trainspotting*, Renton's friends sell his television among other possessions without Renton's permission in order to get money to support their drug habit.

A third manner of obtaining money for heroin or heroin itself is through selling sex. Several movies feature the heroin addict exchanging sex for heroin or sex for the money to obtain heroin. In *Traffic*, a high school girl has sex with a drug dealer and other men in exchange for heroin. In *The Basketball Diaries*, both men

and women are depicted as exchanging sex for heroin. A prostitute in *The Basketball Diaries* offers several men sex for money or sex for drugs in order to support her habit. Additionally, Jim, the main character, agrees to engage in homosexual sex in order to obtain money to buy heroin to support his addiction.

Similarly, Marion in *Requiem for a Dream* performs several sex acts in the movie in order to obtain heroin or money to purchase heroin. In one scene, she performs oral sex on a drug dealer in order to obtain a bag of heroin. In another scene, Marion has sex with a psychiatrist to whom she was not attracted for the sole purpose of obtaining \$2000. That \$2000 was to be used to purchase heroin for their personal use and for sale. In a third scene, Marion performs in a sex show in front of a roomful of men at a drug dealer's apartment in exchange for heroin.

A fourth method of supporting a heroin addiction is through crime. In both *Pulp Fiction* and *Killing Zoe*, the main characters that used heroin were career criminals. Vincent Vega in *Pulp Fiction* is an enforcer for a crime syndicate. The money that he makes working for the crime syndicate finances his heroin habit. The entire group of men that indulge in heroin in *Killing Zoe* are bank robbers planning to commit a robbery the next day.

Another criminal activity that several of the characters used to finance their heroin addiction is selling heroin to other people. In *Trainspotting*, the group of men got together to sell a supply of heroin that they had obtained. Harry and Tyrone, in *Requiem for a Dream*, repeatedly plan to obtain large amounts of heroin and sell it to support their own habit.

In other movies, the characters turn to a life of crime as a means to support their heroin addiction. In *Trainspotting*, the characters abusing heroin begin robbing, stealing, shoplifting, and selling heroin in order to support their habit. In *The Basketball Diaries*, Jim and his friends rob an elderly lady of her purse. As their addiction grows worse, they become involved in stealing cars and robbing restaurants.

Part VII: Legal and Health Consequences of Heroin Use

One obvious consequence of heroin use is overdose. Many of the movies depict heroin overdose. In *Trainspotting*, the main character, Renton, overdoses while shooting up at the drug dealer's place. He is then placed in a cab by the drug dealer and driven to the hospital where the cab driver drags his body out of the cab and places him on the sidewalk in front of the hospital. Renton is taken inside and treated. Following treatment, he is fine.

Another overdose scene is depicted in *Pulp Fiction*. After leaving the drug dealer's house, Vincent Vega, the main heroin-using character, goes to pick up Mia, the wife of his boss. Vincent's boss had instructed him to keep his wife company that evening. After going out to dinner, they return home to where Mia lives. While Vincent is in the bathroom, Mia finds the heroin in Vincent's jacket pocket and snorts a line of heroin thinking that it is cocaine. Vincent returns from the bathroom to find Mia unconscious and overdosing. Vincent takes Mia and drives her to the drug dealer's house rather than taking her to a hospital. At the house, Vincent administers a shot of adrenaline, which the drug dealer had on hand, to Mia by driving the needle through her chest and into her heart where the adrenaline was injected. Mia responds to the shot by

regaining full consciousness. Mia was fine after the shot.

The shot of adrenaline to the heart was an obviously dramatic remedy to address the overdosing situation. While this scene did depict a danger of heroin use, namely overdosing, it did so merely by showing that the use was mistaken or unintended. Therefore the contrast between Vincent's and Mia's use of heroin is interesting. Vincent knowingly uses heroin and suffers no ill effects from that use. On the other hand, Mia accidentally uses heroin thinking that it is cocaine and overdoses. This seems to imply that knowing, responsible use of heroin is safe while unknowing or irresponsible use of heroin leads to overdose.

In *Bringing Out the Dead*, the main character is a paramedic who is going through a difficult time dealing with the realities of his job. One of the calls that they respond to involves a man in his young twenties who overdoses after snorting heroin in a club. Once Cage's character identifies that the patient is overdosing on heroin, he prepares a Narcan shot. Narcan is an antagonist to the same receptors on which heroin acts.⁶⁶ Therefore, Narcan acts to reverse heroin intoxication and overdose.⁶⁷ While Cage's character is preparing the shot for injection, his partner is dramatizing the situation by making the patient's friends gather around in a circle while he prays for the patient. Cage then injects the shot of Narcan and the patient comes back to life and seems to act normally as if nothing happened. This scene gives the impression that, if one gets help during an overdose, there are no consequences for the individual.

Infectious diseases are another consequence of heroin abuse. Skin infections are not uncommon among intravenous heroin users. About one in five intravenous drug users experiences infections or abscesses as a result of injection drug use.⁶⁸ In *Requiem for a Dream*, Harry develops an infection underneath the skin as a result of intravenous heroin use. The infection gradually gets more severe and more painful before Harry seeks medical attention. By the time that Harry seeks medical treatment, there is a large, purple area on

⁶⁶Mosby's Drug Consult, *Naloxone Hydrochloride*, at <http://home.mdconsult.com/das/drug/view/35814452-2/1/1855/top?sid=251555188> (last visited March 3, 2004).

⁶⁷*Id.*

⁶⁸Schoener et al., *supra* note 2, at 539.

his right arm. Harry's arm becomes gangrenous and is eventually amputated.

Another infectious disease that resulted from heroin use in the movies is HIV. The proportion of HIV infection resulting from intravenous drug use has risen from 17% in 1987 to more than 50% in 1994.⁶⁹ Therefore, HIV infection is one of the major risks faced by intravenous drug users. Two movies address the risk of HIV. The best friend of Zed in *Killing Zoe* admits to Zed that he has HIV as a result of his intravenous drug use. In *Trainspotting*, one of the group of friends becomes HIV positive from sharing needles.

Incarceration is the main legal consequence of heroin use depicted in the movies. In *The Basketball Diaries*, Jim and his two friends all end up in jail at different points in the movie as a result of their heroin abuse. One friend goes to jail for being caught in a robbery of a restaurant. Another friend is convicted of murder after pushing a drug dealer who sold him bad drugs off of a rooftop. Jim, the main character, went to jail for 6 months for robbery, assault, possession of narcotics, and resisting arrest.

Similarly, both Harry and Tyrone end up in jail at the end of *Requiem for a Dream* apparently for drug possession. In *Trainspotting*, one of the group ends up in jail for shoplifting whereas the main character gets probation and drug rehabilitation. In *Permanent Midnight*, the main character is arrested for driving under the influence after taking heroin intravenously.

Conclusion

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 536.

This paper examined ten different films, both mainstream and independent films. The purpose was to discern how heroin use was portrayed in the movies during a period of escalating heroin use in the United States. There were some noticeable differences between who are depicted using heroin in the movies and the data concerning heroin use in the United States during that same period. From the ten movies, heroin would appear to be a drug used predominantly by white, middle or upper-middle class people in their twenties. However, this is not what the demographic data reveals.

As a general matter, women are arguably underrepresented as heroin users in these ten movies. On the other hand, it is clear that African-Americans and Hispanics are clearly underrepresented as heroin users in movies as compared with demographic data of heroin use in the United States. The necessary corollary is that Caucasians are overrepresented as heroin users. Whereas a majority of heroin users in the United States are from the lower socioeconomic class, all of the heroin-using characters in the movies were from middle-class or upper-class backgrounds when they began using heroin.

Most of the heroin use shown in movies was in the privacy of apartments and houses. *The Basketball Diaries* is the only movie to depict heroin addicts living on the street and using heroin at “shooting galleries.” Two movies showed public use of heroin in bars and nightclubs. Two movies also showed use of heroin in cars and bathrooms outside the home. The fact that most of the heroin use occurred in a home rather than a “shooting gallery” provides a much nicer image of heroin use and complements the depiction of middle and upper-middle class heroin users.

As far as the route of administration, the films were more accurate in displaying the methods of using heroin. The movies depicted all of the three major forms of heroin use. In fact, many of the films depicted multiple routes of administration of heroin. Nine of the ten films depicted intravenous drug use, which is the predominant route of administration of heroin in the United States. Two of these, *Pulp Fiction* and *Requiem for a Dream*, depict the ritual of intravenous drug use in a very dramatic manner. Such dramatization of the ritual may make it seem more glamorous than it might otherwise appear as shown in real time. The snorting of heroin is shown in five out of the ten films. Chasing the dragon was only seen in only two of the films.

The movies did not accurately depict the signs and symptoms of heroin use that result from the pharmacological effects of heroin on the human body. The movies tend to emphasize the positive or enjoyable aspects of heroin use without showing many of the negative effects of heroin use. For instance, all of the movies show the experience of euphoria with heroin use. Additionally, nine of the ten movies depict the changes in the level of consciousness that result from heroin use. Other, less pleasant effects are not shown as often. Nausea and vomiting as a result of heroin use is depicted in one movie and talked about in another. Constriction of the pupils is shown in one movie. Dysphoria is depicted in one movie as well. No other signs or symptoms of heroin use are seen in any of the movies.

All of the movies show the social network of fellow heroin users that provide support for the habit. This network is formed by tight bonds between the heroin-using characters and held together by their heroin addiction. On the other hand, few of the films depicted any negative effects of heroin use on the character's relationship with non-users. In fact, only two independent films, which were both based on autobiographical books, depicted a series of negative social consequences that arose as a result of the character's heroin use.

Jim, in *The Basketball Diaries*, was expelled from school and kicked out of his parent's apartment. Jerry, in *Permanent Midnight*, lost several jobs, lost his wife, and received limited rights to see his child. Additionally, both *Permanent Midnight* and *Trainspotting* showed child neglect as a result of heroin use. On the other hand, the remaining movies seemed to show little if any social ramifications from the use of heroin.

The portrayal of withdrawal in these movies is not accurately depicted. In fact, withdrawal from heroin is only dealt with in two of the ten movies. Neither of the two withdrawal scenes in *Trainspotting* vividly depicted the realities of heroin withdrawal. While there were references to the diarrhea and vomiting that come with withdrawal in one scene, the only depiction of withdrawal showed the character in pain and unable to sleep. The other movie that featured withdrawal was *The Basketball Diaries*. This scene was a more vivid than the *Trainspotting* scenes. The main character in *The Basketball Diaries*, Jim, experienced a runny nose, pain, sweating, and chills during withdrawal.

In essence, neither movie painted a complete picture of withdrawal. By not showing all of the major symptoms of withdrawal in one movie and not conveying the true length of time that heroin withdrawal takes, the portrayal of heroin withdrawal in these movies gives the impression that it is not as unpleasant as it is in reality.

However, the movies did not seem to glamorize heroin use when it came to showing how the heroin using characters financed their addictions. There are four ways in which the characters in these movies financed their heroin habits. In two movies, the main characters financed their heroin habit through their work.

A second manner, which was shown in three movies, was to sell possessions in order to obtain money for purchasing heroin. A third way to finance a heroin addiction is by selling sex for heroin or for money to buy heroin. Three movies depicted this manner of financing. The fourth way of financing a heroin habit is by criminal activity. Five of the movies showed the characters engaging in criminal activity in order to pay for their heroin habit.

Several different health consequences of heroin use are depicted in the movies. Three movies show overdose. In every case, the character that overdoses receives treatment and lives without permanent injury from the experience. Thus, the movies convey the idea that heroin overdose is not so dangerous because medical treatment can reverse the overdose with no permanent injury.

Other movies showed some of the health related consequences that are permanent after heroin use. *Requiem for a Dream* depicts a skin infection that can result from intravenous drug use. The infection became gangrenous and resulted in his left arm being amputated. Additionally, characters in two movies contracted HIV from intravenous use of heroin.

There were also legal consequences to heroin use. Incarceration was the main legal consequence of heroin use. Characters in four of the movies end up in jail as a result of their heroin addiction.