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Highs and Lows: Shifting Representations of Drugs in North American Cinema (1969–1983)

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Introduction

This study aims to examine how drug representations changed in North American cinema between the 1970s and 1980s. The central argument is that films from this period not only reflected public perceptions of drugs but also actively participated in the social construction of this perception. While reflecting the social anxieties, political discourses, and economic conditions prevalent during the period, the films also presented audiences with new norms of behavior and value. Therefore, cinema should be considered a powerful ideological tool shaping public perceptions of drugs. The films analyzed in this study were Easy Rider (1969), The French Connection II (1975), The Godfather (1972), and Scarface (1983). These films are critical examples of the ideological and social transformation in cinema. For example, in the film Easy Rider, marijuana use is presented as a natural part of the characters' countercultural and free-spirited lifestyles. This points to the counterculture movement of the 1960s and the use of marijuana as a symbol of experimental freedom among young people. In contrast, films from the 1970s and 1980s, such as The French Connection II and Scarface, emphasize the serious consequences of cocaine and heroin use by associating them with violence, addiction, and social collapse.

Drug representations in cinema function as a tool to provide audiences with behavioral models (Markert). While marijuana use is portrayed in a humorous or mundane context, heroin and later cocaine use are associated with dramatic destruction and social dangers. This demonstrates how social learning theory operates through cinema. By observing the experiences of the film's characters, the audience learns which behaviors are socially acceptable and which behaviors have negative consequences (9).

The research is structured as a multilayered analysis. In the first phase, the theoretical and historical foundations of the study will be presented. In this context, the social and political contexts of specific drug types will be explained. In the second phase, each film will be examined in detail in its own section. During this analysis, the films' narrative structure, character function, mythological frameworks, and social messages will be evaluated (Alexander, 2010). In the final phase, the findings will be synthesized from a comparative perspective. This section will discuss how drug representations in films have evolved historically and the social impact of these representations (Markert, 85).

In summary, drug representations in cinema are not merely a source of entertainment. They are also a powerful tool for conveying behavioral norms and ideological messages to young and impressionable audiences. While cannabis is associated with countercultural experience and everyday life, heroin and, after 1980, cocaine have been associated with addiction, violence, and social collapse. These different representations show the reflection of social perception and political discourses on cinema, and when analyzed from a social constructivist perspective, the ideological functions and social effects of films are more clearly understood (Markert, 85)

Chapter 1: The Theoretical and Historical Architecture of Cinematic Drug Narratives

1.1. A Decade of Disquiet: Public Anxieties and Shifting Drug Scopes (1969-1983)

The period from the late 1960s to the 1980s stands out as a critical turning point in North American cinematic history and socio-political development. These years were shaped by significant social and political upheavals such as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the counterculture movement, and the Watergate scandal. During this same period, Hollywood underwent a period of radical change with the repeal of the Production Code in 1968; this removed long-standing moral constraints and gave filmmakers the freedom to explore previous taboo subjects. Drug addiction, in particular, became a controversial issue that could be examined through this new institutional liberalization. If the counterculture's colorful optimism characterized the late 1960s, a harsh, monochromatic hangover characterized the decade that followed. The American narrative about drugs changed from one of exploration to one of criminalization between Richard Nixon's 1969 inauguration and the start of the Reagan administration's "Just Say No" campaign in the early 1980s. This created the gritty, suspicious, and frequently tragic backdrop that drug narratives were projected against in this era's cinema. To understand the tragic junkie or the cinematic drug dealer of 1970s cinema, one must first understand the political and legal structure set up to keep them in check.

The Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act (CAP), enacted in 1970, marked the beginning of a radical transformation in federal drug policy. This legislation consolidated laws enacted at different times, which had limited compatibility, into a single framework. The law's primary goal was to replace the fragmented and fragmented legal approach

to narcotics with a more systematic structure. Accordingly, drugs were classified based on scientific assessments, taking into account their medical value and abuse risks. Five distinct "schedules" (categories) were established, clarifying the legal status of each substance (Musto, 1999). This new system created a more predictable structure for both health policies and criminal law. It also provided a common ground for law enforcement and health authorities. Consequently, the CAP became one of the cornerstones of the modern regulatory framework for drug control in the United States. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan began to reactivate the War on Drugs. The 1986 Drug Enforcement Act provided $1.7 billion in funding for law enforcement and established mandatory minimum sentences. These laws led to significant racial inequalities in the criminal justice system. For example, possession of heroin, used predominantly by African Americans, carried a five-year prison sentence, while possession of marijuana, used predominantly by whites, often did not (Alexander, 2010). Although the CSA established an institutional framework, the real ideological turning point in the war on drugs occurred on June 17, 1971. Then-US President Richard Nixon radically changed the tone of the issue by defining drug use as "public enemy number one (Massing,1998)." This rhetoric transformed the drug issue from a social problem to a threat to national security.

With this transformation, American public discourse was also reshaped. Previously viewed as an extension of youth counterculture and social alienation, substance use was now portrayed as a threat to domestic order and public safety. This approach paved the way for the rapid expansion of federal drug control mechanisms. The establishment of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1973 was a concrete consequence of this institutional expansion.

The Shafer Commission, established in 1972, clearly demonstrated the government's reluctance to address drug policy based on scientific and public health principles. Appointed by

President Nixon, this commission conducted a comprehensive study to examine the effects of marijuana. The report, titled "Marijuana: A Signal of Misunderstanding," recommended decriminalizing personal use and concluded that marijuana did not directly lead to violent behavior (Musto 1999). However, political concerns overrode scientific findings. Nixon, fearing being perceived as "soft" by the public, rejected the report's findings before its publication. This choice demonstrated the adoption of a policy line based on punishment rather than a treatment-based approach. In the long run, this approach laid the groundwork for a process that had grave social consequences, particularly for racial minorities.

The implementation of new drug laws made the structural inequalities existing in the American criminal justice system more visible. Historical archives and theoretical studies demonstrate that the "War on Drugs" approach was not merely a technical policy aimed at combating crime. This doctrine was designed as a social control mechanism aimed at limiting the political and cultural influence of certain social groups (Alexander, 2010). Left-wing movements opposing the Vietnam War and the Black Power tradition were, in particular, direct targets of this strategy. The state deliberately employed criminalization as a tool to reduce the public visibility of these groups and weaken their organizing capacity (Alexander, 2010).

One of the most striking evidences of this political approach comes from statements made years later by John Ehrlichman, one of the architects of the Nixon administration's domestic policy. In a 1994 interview, Ehrlichman clearly articulated the administration's fundamental strategy. In his statement, he stated that it was impossible to directly outlaw anti-war individuals or Black Americans. Instead, he argued that the hippie counterculture was linked to marijuana; he stated that black communities were identified with heroin. He acknowledged that the harsh criminalization of these substances allowed the dismantling of these communities, the arrest of

their leaders, and their systematic discrediting in the media (Baum, 2016). These admissions reveal that drug policy, beyond being a legal measure, functioned as a tool of ideological pressure.

One of the harshest institutional examples in this context was the Rockefeller Drug Laws, enacted in New York State in 1973. Strongly supported by then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller, these laws made mandatory minimum prison sentences a central principle. Possession of narcotics of around four ounces resulted in sentences ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment. These sentencing ranges were positioned on a par with serious violent crimes such as second-degree murder (Alexander, 2010). Thus, non-violent acts were brought closer to the most serious crime categories within the sentencing regime. Although these laws employed universal and neutral language at the textual level, a profound racialization practice emerged during their implementation (Provine, 2007). Police enforcement and prosecutorial activities were concentrated primarily in neighborhoods with a high minority population. Powers such as stops, frisks, and home raids began to be used in a manner that created a spatially and ethnically selective approach. This created a permanent disconnect between legal norms and actual practice, effectively transforming criminal justice into a selective mechanism. The targeting of heroin, in particular, was not based solely on a pharmacological preference. The media language of the period systematically presented heroin as a symbol of "urban decline." This discourse, while not directly stated, produced an implicit coding that pointed to black communities. In contrast, substances more frequently used by white middle classes were represented in public discourse as milder, temporary, or individual deviations. This differentiated language institutionalized a class and racial hierarchy based on drug types.

Following the implementation of these policies, African Americans experienced a sharp increase in arrest and conviction rates. While quantitative studies show that drug use and dealing rates are broadly similar among white and black Americans, the vast majority of drug offenders in

prisons were Black and Latino (Alexander, 2010). By the late 1970s, New York State's prison population had nearly doubled. This transformation served as a model for the "tough on crime" policies adopted by other states (Drucker, 2002). The dual justice structure that emerged during this period was not limited to the legal realm but also extended into cultural production. Cinema became a significant medium that reproduced these discriminatory representations. White drug users were often portrayed as tragic, fragile, or rebellious characters. In contrast, Black drug users were frequently portrayed as threatening, potentially violent, and posing a risk to social order (Alexander, 2010). While widespread cocaine use in white suburbs was often met with fines or probation, marijuana and heroin use in heavily black urban centers was suppressed with heavy police operations and long prison terms.

By 1983, this political period had permanently established the legal infrastructure that made mass incarceration possible. The state systematically shifted the drug issue from a public health framework to a crime and punishment framework. This legal and ideological architecture created a ready-made narrative foundation for 1980s American cinema. In the films of this period, the figure of the "drug dealer" became a symbol of absolute evil, and these characters were shaped by representations constructed from the real-world suffering of marginalized communities (Alexander 2010).

1.2. The Markert Lens: Social Construction and Cinematic Mythmaking

The theoretical basis for examining the representation of drugs in cinema is based on social constructionism. This approach posits that cinematic narratives play a decisive role in public perception and political myths. According to Markert, "the more visual the depiction, the greater the impact on the viewer" (Markert 8).

Markert illustrates his social learning theory with examples from the work of Howard Becker. Becker long ago demonstrated that cannabis users learn about the effects of the drug by listening to the experiences of others. For example, users listen to the "pleasurable" experience others have under the influence of cannabis and try to understand how they feel during this process. Members of the social group help each other interpret these experiences. Therefore, many cannabis users experience an "increased appetite." Interestingly, there is no direct pharmacological evidence to support this effect. However, users frequently report feeling hungry under the influence of cannabis. First-time cannabis users often expect, based on the experiences of others, that cannabis will increase their appetite, and this expectation often comes true. This is a result of observational learning. One of the most fundamental ways a person learns about the effects of a drug is by observing the experiences of others or observing their reactions. These others can be personal acquaintances or even a character in a movie (Markert 9).

Markert states that this effect occurs through several basic mechanisms. Movies not only provide viewers with entertainment but also create behavioral models regarding the acceptability and effectiveness of illicit substances. This is especially true for young and impressionable audiences (Markert 8). Parents and peers are important role models. However, television and film characters can also serve this role. Especially when these characters are portrayed as attractive and successful, viewers may perceive their behavior as role models. If the characters are achieving financial gain or attracting the attention of the opposite sex, and if their negative behaviors are not punished, viewers may also evaluate these behaviors as appropriate. The "scripts" observed on screen can serve as behavioral guidelines for the viewer (Markert 8). The fact that characters resorting to illegal actions to achieve desired goals and face no serious consequences allows the audience to perceive these behaviors as attractive and appropriate. Therefore, whether or not the

consequences of these actions are shown in films is a key indicator of the film's ideological stance.

According to Markert's analysis, drug representations in post-1960s cinema are positioned within a specific hierarchy. This hierarchy generates different social and moral meanings for each substance. In the case of marijuana, with the cultural transformation of the 1960s, cinematic narratives gradually abandoned the tradition of associating marijuana use with dramatic and exaggerated negative consequences. During this period, marijuana was presented as a part of everyday life and depicted without serious negative consequences. The traditional "gateway" myth, that is, the claim that marijuana use would inevitably lead to hard drugs, was either questioned or completely ignored (Markert 78; Johnson 102). In contrast, heroin has been consistently represented negatively in cinema across nearly all genres. Heroin has been associated with personal decline, death, and social decay; thus, providing a strong moral basis for punitive and preventative policies (80). This universally negative representation of heroin provides a social learning model that demonstrates to the audience the drug's inevitable destructive effects.

The representation of cocaine in cinema has undergone the most striking change compared to other drugs. During the 1970s, cocaine was often presented as an elite substance and portrayed as a relatively harmless form of experience. Film characters often used it as a symbol of luxury, prestige, and social privilege. For example, some films of the period portrayed cocaine as an indispensable part of nightlife, portraying users as socially compatible and successful individuals. During this period, the negative consequences of cocaine use were either ignored or dramatically exaggerated. However, by the mid-1980s, the portrayal of cocaine in cinema had dramatically changed. Increasing public anxiety, media coverage of violence, and the proliferation of crack cocaine also had an impact on cinema. Cocaine was no longer merely a symbol of an elite substance, but rather a dangerous substance associated with addiction, violence, and psychotic

behavior. Film characters experience personal decline, relationship problems, and social isolation as a result of cocaine use. For example, in crime and drama films of the 1980s, characters who use cocaine often end tragically or are associated with the criminal world. This transformation demonstrates how narratives in cinema are restructured in parallel with societal fears and government policies. This dramatic transformation of cocaine reveals that drug representations are not merely for entertainment purposes but also shape the audience's social perception and risk assessment. Cinema, like a social mirror, shows the audience the behavioral and social consequences associated with certain substances. In this context, the differences between the representations of marijuana, heroin, and cocaine in New Hollywood cinema are a critical tool for understanding how each substance has evolved within the context of social perception and political discourse.

For example, with the cultural shift of the 1960s, marijuana was presented as an ordinary part of everyday life, challenging the traditional "gateway" myth. Characters do not experience serious negative consequences while using marijuana; their experiences are often portrayed in a humorous or mundane context. Heroin, in contrast, has been negatively represented in nearly all film genres. Heroin use has been associated with personal decline, death, and social decay, and these representations have provided a moral foundation for punitive and preventative policies. Cocaine, however, has undergone a dramatic transformation between these two extremes. Initially presented as an elite symbol, with increasing social anxiety in the 1980s and the rise of crack cocaine, it has become a substance associated with serious negative consequences in cinema.

These differences present distinct social and moral messages to viewers for each drug type. While marijuana is normalized in humorous and mundane contexts, heroin and late-stage cocaine use are associated with devastating consequences and social dangers. Therefore, cinema functions

not only as a medium for entertainment but also as a powerful tool for providing viewers with behavioral models, social learning, and the transmission of ideological messages. These representations provide a critical framework for understanding the fundamental mechanisms of social constructionism and analyzing the ideological functions in films (Markert 85).

Chapter 2: Cinematic Archetypes: From Counterculture to Organized Crime

2.1. *Easy Rider* (1969): The Road, the Trip, and the Myth of Countercultural Freedom



Fig. 1. Still from *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper. Columbia Pictures, 1969

To judge the importance of Easy Rider, we have to examine what was going on at Hollywood during its release. Hollywood was undergoing a difficult period which was known as "Nobody Knows Anything," first told by William Goldman (Lev 18). From 1969 to 1972, nearly half a billion dollars were lost due to the ongoing “film recession”. The trusted and reliable actors/actresses, the usual themes and storytelling were no longer appreciated by the ever changing

and diversifying audience, thus, directors, producers and Hollywood in general had to take risks and invest in younger talents, try different themes and genres, go to the lengths and push the boundaries of what was allowed or seem as “appropriate” during the time. Peter Lev says that “The 1970s in film were not only the era of youth culture but also a period of antiwar satire, of right-wing vigilantism, of blaxploitation, of women’s liberation, of blatant sexism, of family values, of new family units. If nobody knows anything, then everything is permitted.” (17)

Directed by Dennis Hopper and starring Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson, Easy Rider is one of the most effective cinematic reflections of the 1960s counterculture. The film deeply explores the quest for individual freedom, its defiance of social norms, and its critique of the system. Peter Lev considers this film a key example of New Hollywood cinema of the period, noting its blend of political, cultural, and aesthetic conflicts (Lev 143). Though Lev does not consider this movie a Western Movie since Billy and Wyatt’s quest is from West to East, and “the heroes head not to an open frontier but to a closed land of bigotry” (6). John Markert examines the film's drug representations, offering a wide range of analyses, from the portrayal of marijuana as a "benign perversion" to the use of cocaine as a financial tool (Markert 92). In *Easy Rider*, cannabis is not merely a recreational drug; it is a central tool for the protagonists' social interactions and processes of self-awareness. The campfire scene between Wyatt (Peter Fonda), Billy (Dennis Hopper), and George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) demonstrates this clearly. Unlike a classic Hollywood narrative, the scene creates an environment of intellectual dialogue and personal discovery between the characters, rather than dramatic conflict or violence.

George Hanson is introduced at a critical juncture in the narrative when Wyatt and Billy are arrested for parading without a permit in a small New Mexico town. Up to this point, the protagonists are "lost bohemians" or "beautiful losers" whose motivations are largely passive and

goalless. Hanson, however, arrives as a "prodigal son" of a privileged Southern background. He is a lawyer whose father's local influence is powerful enough to keep him out of serious trouble despite his habitual public drunkenness.

Hanson represents a specific American archetype: the liberal insider who recognizes the rot within the establishment but lacks the initial willpower to fully "drop out". He wears a college sweater and a football helmet, symbols of a traditional and affordable academic past rather than the leather and fringe of the bikers. This costume serves as a semiotic marker; he is the guy-next-door who makes the radicalism of the riders digestible to the average viewer. His role as an ACLU lawyer provides him with the intellectual vocabulary to deconstruct the American Dream while his status as the local guy allows him to navigate the hostile geography of the rural South.

George Hanson is portrayed at the beginning of the film as a liberal, educated lawyer who takes social values seriously. Hanson initially approaches the experience with caution due to the potential addiction risk of cannabis, also metaphorically representing the early 1930's era's stance on the use of various substances, thanks to the movies like *Reefer Madness (1936).* Thanks to Wyatt's patient guidance and friendly approach, Hanson decides to try cannabis. Under the influence of marijuana, Hanson sheds his defensive cynicism and goes under a transition, becoming enlightened, freed, unchained. He delivers a celebrated monologue regarding the decline of American freedom and the existence of extraterrestrial societies, specifically Venusians. This marijuana-fueled insight allows Hanson to articulate the film's central ideological critique: that Americans discuss the value of freedom incessantly but are terrified of individuals who actually exhibit it. For the characters, marijuana is framed as a tool for "liberation" from the constraints of the "antiquated hierarchy". The interaction here functions not only as a substance but also as a ritual; cannabis fosters social bonding, deepening conversation, and personal insight among the

characters. The scene stands in clear contrast to the propaganda films of earlier American cinema like *Reefer Madness (1936)* where marijuana was commonly associated with violence, psychosis, and moral decline. Hanson's experience focuses on freedom, American hypocrisy, and self-doubt rather than serious negative consequences. This contributes to the normalization of marijuana use in cinema and distinguishes soft drugs from dramatic narratives of disaster.

The assassination of George Hanson is the narrative's definitive turning point, marking the transition from a celebratory road movie to a grim "American nightmare". After being taunted by a sheriff and his group in a Southern diner, the trio is attacked in their sleep by vigilantes with clubs. Hanson is bludgeoned to death, a brutal act that remains terrifying in its suddenness and lack of overt justification. Scholars view Hanson's death as an allegorical murder of the ideal. He dies as a "martyr," his killing echoing the real-world political violence of the era, such as the murder of the Mississippi Freedom Riders. He is killed because he is the "traitorous native son", the one who knew the rules of the establishment but chose to ride with the outcasts, the freaks, outsiders. His death signifies the destruction of the only character capable of reconciling the generational and regional divides of the sixties. The aftermath of his death also serves to critique the protagonists. Wyatt and Billy do not seek justice for their friend; instead, they abandon their murdered friend by the roadside to continue their quest for a bordello Hanson had mentioned. This act of abandonment highlights their ultimate selfishness and the degree to which their "freedom" has been compromised by their involvement in the drug trade.

As Markert emphasizes, the scene's significance is seen not only in individual character development but also in creating social perception. In the film, marijuana functions not as a trigger for violence or addiction, but as a tool that initiates conversation, social ritual, and intellectual dialogue. In this regard, Easy Rider sets a standard for post-1960 American cinema that portrays

the negative effects of soft drugs without exaggeration. The scene's cinematographic structure also supports this message. The camera's close-ups of the characters draw the viewer into the conversation, while the use of natural lighting and wide angles reinforce the feeling of freedom and connection with nature. The musical selection adds a light, meditative tone to the scene, emphasizing the ritual and experiential nature of cannabis.

2.2. Cocaine as the MacGuffin: Financing Freedom Through Moral Omission

In Easy Rider, cocaine is presented not as a substance for individual and ritual use like marijuana or LSD, but as an economic and dramatic tool. Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy's (Dennis Hopper) road trip is financed by the profits from a major cocaine sale in Los Angeles. This initiates the film's central conflict and enables the road trip; cocaine functions as what Peter Lev describes as a MacGuffin: a device that triggers the plot but is not morally questioned (Lev 150). Lev points out a key cinematic feature of this use: cocaine's financial function within the narrative prevents the audience from questioning the drug's illicit or moral dimension. This distinguishes the film from traditional "drugs are criminals, they get their comeuppance" narratives and reflects the more realistic, complex morality of New Hollywood (Lev 151). John Markert, on the other hand, associates the role of cocaine in the film with countercultural ideals. Wyatt and Billy seek a liberated life, but this freedom depends on the money earned through smuggling. According to Markert, this is one of the film's fundamental contradictions: the characters' spiritual and individual quests are financially dependent on a harsh illegal activity. To obscure this contradiction, the film presents cocaine as a neutral financial tool, prioritizing the narrative flow over moral questioning (Markert 98).

The cinematographic presentation of the cocaine scene is also noteworthy. The sales or transportation scenes, often rendered in fast-paced cuts and wide urban scenes, heighten the tension

and convey the criminal nature of cocaine without imposing a moral judgment. This contrasts sharply with the ritualistic and spiritual intensity of the marijuana and LSD scenes. Cocaine is not a ritual or a tool for self-awareness in the film; it functions solely as an economic tool, a "story engine" (Lev 152). Markert also notes that cocaine's role in the film foreshadows the more flexible and morally neutral view of drugs in pre-1980s cinema. While in later films like Scarface (1983), cocaine is associated with moral condemnation and dramatic consequences, in Easy Rider it functions merely as a financial resource for the journey (Markert 99).

2.3. Psychedelics (LSD): The Search for Spiritual, Non-Political Transcendence



Fig. 2 Still from *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Columbia Pictures. 1969.

The cemetery scene in New Orleans is one of the most intense and dramatic moments in Easy Rider where LSD use is presented. This scene is designed to visualize both the characters' inner crises and the counterculture's spiritual orientations. As Peter Lev emphasizes, distorted color filters, and rapid editing techniques used in the scene reflect the protagonists' stream of consciousness and inner chaos (Lev 155). The visual style of the scene is intentionally "unprofessional" and jarring. Shot on 16mm film by non-Hollywood operators, the sequence uses fisheye lenses, hectic editing, and disorienting background noises, including industrial clanking, to capture the "sensory coding" of a bad trip. The characters are shown stripping, crying, and laughing uncontrollably at others' pain, exposing character flaws and unfulfilled dreams that are shrouded in fear, doubt and dread. Sometimes blurry and fragmented images allow the audience to experience the characters' perceptions and psychic turmoil. Wyatt and Billy enact a psychodrama amidst the monuments and statues. These dramatic performances symbolize the characters'

confrontations with their own mistakes, losses, and the limits of their quest for freedom. Wyatt's words, "You know, Billy, we've ruined everything," express both personal disillusionment and the counterculture's fragile position within American society (Lev 155). The religious symbolism in this scene is particularly potent. Wyatt is seen sitting in the lap of a statue of the Virgin Mary, reciting prayers about crucifixion while simultaneously expressing hatred for his mother. The tension between the "modernity" of LSD use and the "traditional" Catholic setting of the cemetery is never resolved; instead, the scene becomes "parasitic on its setting," using the atmospherics of the graveyard to signify an existential terminus. This trip reveals the characters' "fear and loathing" rather than the spiritual unity often associated with the drug. According to Markert, this scene presents LSD not as a political tool but as a tool for individual spiritual exploration; In the film, the psychedelic experience reveals the characters' inner questioning and spiritual journeys (Markert 102). Cinematographically, the scene supports the effects of LSD not only visually but also through sound and music. Surreal background music enhances the characters' mental state and psychologically involves the viewer. Furthermore, the wide-angle shots in the scene allow the cemetery and monuments to surround the characters, symbolizing the conflict between freedom and societal limitations. Thematically, the LSD scene contrasts sharply with the calm and social nature of the cannabis ritual. While cannabis scenes are often associated with conversation, relaxation, and intellectual sharing, the LSD scene presents an intense, unresolved, and individual quest for transcendence. This, as Markert notes, presents the spiritual and psychological effects of psychedelic experiences on the characters, independent of political conflicts associated with society or legal authorities (Markert 102). Finally, the scene establishes a pre-established connection to the film's themes of death and destruction. As the characters emerge from their LSD experience, the internal and external realities they encounter foreshadow the inevitable tragic

outcome of their journey. According to Lev, this scene stands out as an example of New Hollywood's emphasis on character psychology and individual experience.

Chapter 3: Heroin and the Moral Architect: The Godfather (1972)

The Godfather (1972) is one of the most structured and morally explicit examples of drug representation in American cinema. According to Peter Lev, the film uses heroin not merely as a MacGuffin but as a Rubicon that tests the internal structure and social order of the Corleone family. Heroin symbolizes the difference between traditional organized crime and modern, ruthless, and capitalist criminal operations (Lev 213). John Markert describes the film's function as a central element in determining the family's moral hierarchy, emphasizing the drug's decisive influence on the Corleone family's values and balance of power (Markert 110).

3.1. Heroin as the Corrosive Substance: Maintaining the Negative Valence

The narrative hinges on Vito Corleone's refusal to enter the drug trade. This decision positions Vito not only as a leader with a long-standing understanding of crime but also as a character with moral boundaries. Lev describes this as a key cinematic strategy that allows the audience to understand the social and familial destructiveness of the drug trade (Lev 215). Vito's clear line against heroin demonstrates his empathic qualities to the audience while also setting the context for the family's other illegal activities. Markert argues that this decision reinforces the film's absolute negative value of heroin, effectively functionalizing the drug as a tool for moral boundaries (Markert 112).

The scene structure and character interactions enhance the dramatic impact of drugs. The conflict with Sollozzo relates to Vito's violation of moral boundaries and is directly linked to the family's political and economic decisions. Sonny Corleone's aggressive and enthusiastic drug dealing reflects his impatience, recklessness, and disregard for consequences character; this approach functions as a narrative element that directly prepares for his tragic ending. Michael Corleone's calculated acceptance of heroin is explored on a different level: with Vito's death and

his assumption of leadership of the family, Michael maximizes not only his commercial interests but also his moral compromises. This transition symbolizes the moral collapse and ruthlessness in Michael's character development (Markert 115).



Fig. 3. Still from *The Godfather.* Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures. 1972.

Cinematographically, the lighting, camera angles, and editing strategies used in drug-related scenes reinforce the negative value of heroin. Dark and shadowy scenes emphasize the characters' internal conflict with crime and family responsibilities. Close-ups convey emotional intensity to the audience through the characters' facial expressions and reactions, while wide angles visualize the crisis of family and social structure (Lev 216). Markert argues that these techniques reinforce the negative image of heroin in cinema, presenting the drug not only as an individual but also as a societal threat (Markert 116). The film uses heroin both dramatically and symbolically,

highlighting the drug's destructive impact on family and society. According to Lev, in 1970s American cinema, heroin, like in The Godfather, was positioned as a narrative element endowed with the status of absolute evil (Lev 220). Markert, however, argues that this consistently negative representation of heroin conveys a powerful message to the audience about the inevitable social and familial destruction of drugs (Markert 116). Thus, the film clearly structures both the moral hierarchy and the boundaries within the criminal world, presenting heroin as a central threat disrupting social order.

3.2. The Transfiguration of Michael Corleone: Paternal Melodrama, Corporate Capitalism, and the Narcotics Nexus in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*

The release of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* in 1972 marked a pivotal juncture in American cinematic history, occurring during an era of profound cultural and ontological insecurity. The film emerged not merely as an entry into the crime genre, but as a monumental synthesis of the paternal melodrama and the gangster epic, reflecting the specific anxieties of a nation grappling with the fallout of the Vietnam War and the institutional betrayals of the Watergate era. At the center of this narrative is the character of Michael Corleone, whose trajectory from a decorated World War II hero to a ruthless, isolated patriarch serves as a masterclass in psychological transformation and moral disengagement. The critical fascination with Michael's evolution stems from his unique position as a second-generation immigrant attempting to navigate the conflicting demands of "straight-line" assimilation into the American middle class and the archaic, feudal loyalties required by his family's criminal enterprise. This analysis explores the psychological depth of Michael's character, his divergence from the traditional leadership style of his father, Vito Corleone, and the pivotal role of the narcotics trade as a signifier of the shifting moral and political boundaries of the 1970s.

Michael Corleone's character arc is arguably the most compelling in cinema history, functioning as a study of how absolute power erodes the human soul. He is introduced as a reluctant outsider, a man who has spent his adult life distancing himself from the "family business" through higher education at Dartmouth College and distinguished service in the United States Marine Corps. His initial identification is with the American state rather than the Sicilian clan; he wears his military uniform to his sister's wedding as a totem of his "civilian" status and tells his girlfriend, Kay Adams, "That's my family, Kay, not me". Scholars identify this early Michael as an idealistic figure who embodies the possibilities of the American Dream, the hope that the progeny of immigrants could achieve legitimacy through merit and service.

However, the attempted assassination of Don Vito Corleone catalyzes a profound psychological transfiguration. This transition is often viewed through Freudian and Lacanian lenses as a struggle with paternal authority and a submission to the "Symbolic Order" of the family. Michael's return to the family fold is not a simple choice but an "acquiescence to preordained destiny" triggered by the trauma of witnessing his father's vulnerability. His transformation is marked by a shift from "good Samaritan" ideals to a "ruthless pragmatism" where clear-cut logic and strategic elimination replace the emotional bonds that once defined his character. By the film's conclusion, Michael has surpassed his father in his willingness to wield unfettered power, but he has done so at the cost of his own humanity and eventual isolation.

Michael's evolution is characterized by several behavioral patterns identified in psychological research, most notably emotional suppression and rationalization. To manage the immense stress and internal conflict generated by his criminal actions, Michael creates a "psychological rift," creating emotional distance from the consequences of his decisions. This process is described as "moral disengagement," where the protagonist justifies unethical acts,

including the murder of his own brother-in-law, Carlo Rizzi, as necessary for the greater good of the family's survival. Furthermore, Michael's behavior exhibits signs of "moral injury," a condition resulting from actions that violate one's foundational moral code. While Vito Corleone appears at ease in the role of Don, Michael is burdened by it, viewing himself as a "sacrificial hero" who is losing his soul to protect a family that is simultaneously disintegrating under his command. This internal turmoil manifests as a move from a "good man torn between two worlds" to a figure that weds the impersonality of modern mass society with the violence of traditional Sicilian peasant culture, creating a new, corporate model of the mob.

3.3. Comparative Leadership: The Traditional vs. The Corporate Don

The distinction between Vito and Michael Corleone is often framed as a battle between "wisdom" and "power". Vito Corleone represents the traditional, "Old World" patriarch who established the family's reputation through a combination of diplomacy, soft power, and the cultivation of respect. His authority is both functional and symbolic; he is the "hub of moral and emotional authority," eliciting deference through favors and the building of a community of well-wishers. Vito understands that true power is about legacy and stability, not just expansion. He operates as an entrepreneur who views himself as a defender of the "little man" against a corrupt and inept judicial system.

Michael, conversely, represents the "corporatization" of the Mafia. He transforms the family into a "powerful and sophisticated organization" that operates more like a multinational corporation than a tribal clan. While Vito's decisions were rooted in experience and intuition, Michael's are driven by "cold logic" and a desire for absolute control. Michael's rise to power marks a shift away from individual loyalty and bargaining toward a structure built on surveillance and secret-keeping. He is a "man of business" who views violence as a strategic tool rather than a

necessary expense, leading to the "massacre" of traditional values in favor of profit and expansion.

In Machiavellian terms, the two Godfathers represent different successful approaches to leadership, though their outcomes diverge significantly in the realm of personal fulfillment. Vito uses "love" (relational leadership) to win the hearts and minds of his community, which provides a layer of protection that bullets cannot offer. His preference for diplomacy is not just a tactic but an art form, allowing him to be "assertive rather than aggressive". Michael, finding that his status as a decorated hero does not grant him immediate authority in the underworld, resorts to "fear" as a constant reminder of the consequences of betrayal. While Michael is more "effective" in expanding the empire internationally, it comes at the cost of the family's endearment and his own spiritual isolation. The pivotal point of contention that triggers the "Five Families War" is the narcotics trade, personified by the character Virgil "The Turk" Sollozzo. Sollozzo, an associate of the Tattaglia family, approaches the Corleones for financial backing and, more crucially, for "political and police protection" for his heroin operation. Vito's refusal of this offer is one of the most analyzed moments of the film, highlighting his "tradition-conscious" approach to crime.

Vito Corleone's disapproval of the drug trade is often misinterpreted as a strictly moral stance. While he refers to narcotics as a "dirty business" and an "infamia," his primary rationale is pragmatic. Vito correctly assesses the risk-reward ratio, arguing that his "friends in politics" and the judiciary would tolerate gambling, prostitution, or alcohol smuggling as "harmless vices," but would likely withdraw their support if he became involved in drugs. To Vito, drugs bring too much attention from law enforcement and increase the likelihood that middlemen will turn informant rather than face the stiff prison sentences associated with narcotics trafficking. His refusal is a sign of his "moral virtue" within the specific code of the Mafia, aiming to protect the long-term survival of the family over immediate profit.

Michael’s eventual embrace of the drug trade, formalized at the Commission meeting after Sonny’s death, represents a shift toward a "New World" logic that recognizes narcotics as the "inevitable vice". While Vito’s initial refusal created a checkmate situation, Michael and the other Dons realize that the drug trade is too lucrative to ignore, with returns on investment estimated at "1000%". The other families, led by Barzini, sought to weaken the Corleone monopoly on political power by using drug revenues to buy their own influence. Michael’s acceptance is also a tactical necessity to secure his safe return from Sicily and end the vendetta following the murder of his wife, Apollonia. He inherits a world where "business" has become divorced from "honor," and where narcotics have become the "spoils of war" necessary for the family's transition to Las Vegas. Michael's involvement in the trade is "strictly business," reflecting a corporate willingness to adapt to market demands that the "old-school" Vito resisted.

The narrative of *The Godfather* is articulated through highly stylized scenes that utilize innovative cinematography and staging to communicate Michael's inner transfiguration. These scenes function as "decisive moments" that mark Michael's passage from civilian to Don. The hospital sequence is a masterclass in building tension through "surreal" emptiness. Michael’s journey through the "maze of empty hallways" to find his father’s room emphasizes his singularity and isolation. Standing outside the entrance with the baker, Enzo, Michael uses a cigarette and a lighter as "totems of dominance" and cool authority, remaining steady while Enzo’s hands shake. His whispered vow to his father "I'm with you now" is the "Point of No Return," where Michael irrevocably takes responsibility for the family’s safety, a role Fredo was unable to fulfill during the initial attack.

The assassination of Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey at Louis' Restaurant in the Bronx is the "Break into Two" point of the narrative. The tension is heightened by the sound of an elevated

train, which acts as a "roaring in Michael's head," externalizing his psychological turmoil before masking the eventual gunshots. This scene "solidifies Michael's resolve," showing him applying "cold reasoning" to the brutal realities of the Mafia. The hesitation before the act, followed by the efficient execution, marks Michael's definitive entry into the criminal underworld he once eschewed.

The film's climax, the "Baptism and Murder" sequence, is one of the most remarkable examples of cross-cutting in cinematic history. By alternating between the sacred Catholic ritual and the brutal execution of the heads of the Five Families, Coppola unites the holy and the profane in the person of Michael. As Michael "renounces Satan" in Latin, his voice-over serves as the approval for the killings happening simultaneously across New York. This sequence illustrates Michael's "ultimate dichotomy": he is becoming a "sacrificial hero" for his family while consciously welcoming evil into his soul. The "cry of a child" punctuating the murders accentuates the "soiling" of the sacrament and the removal of all wholesomeness from Michael's new reign.

3.4. The Death of Vito: The Foundation Falls

Vito's death in the tomato garden provides a visual and symbolic contrast to Michael's rising darkness. In this scene, the "powerful figure" of the first scene is replaced by a "powerless Don" in casual clothing, shriveled by age. His death while playing "monster" with his grandson represents the "ultimate exertion" of his life; the performance of power. The camera's frame of the tomato garden, with Vito resting on the soil, resonates with his role as the "foundation" of the family; his fall is necessary to make room for the "new Don". The warm tones of orange and brown that characterize this scene die with him, as the film moves into the "deep darkness" and "muted earth-tones" of Michael's office.

The portrayal of drugs in *The Godfather* must be understood in the context of the early 1970s, a period when "drug abuse was transformed in the public mind from a social problem... to a national crisis of the first order". On June 17, 1971, only months before the film's release, President Richard Nixon declared a "War on Drugs," naming drug abuse "public enemy number one". This declaration marked a dramatic shift from a "medical" approach to one centered on "Law and Order," enforcement, and punishment. Scholars contend that the Nixon administration utilized the "War" metaphor as a "manufacture of concern" to reap electoral dividends. By associating illicit substances with the "antiwar left and black people," the administration could criminalize both heavily while bypassing the social causes of drug use like poverty and unemployment. This "drug war logic" prioritized prohibition and surveillance, leading to the creation of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1973 and a massive increase in incarceration rates for minority populations.

The Godfather functions as a dark allegory for American capitalism, where the "American Dream" is achieved not through hard work but through "cleverness, ruthlessness, and physical force". The film's opening line, "I believe in America," is juxtaposed with a request for extralegal justice, suggesting that the "legitimate" American system has failed its citizens. Coppola uses the Corleone family as a vessel to critique a corporate culture where "behind every fortune is a crime". The transition from Vito to Michael represents the movement from "Fordist-Keynesian capitalism," which emphasized community and labor compromises, to a "neoliberal" age of expansion, individualism, and the erosion of ethical boundaries. Michael's pursuit of "legitimacy" is portrayed as an impossible goal, a "tragic flaw" that blinds him to the reality that the tools he uses to protect the family, murder and betrayal, are the very things that destroy it. The Corleone saga thus reflects the 1970s "pathos of failure," where the quest for success ends in moral decay

and spiritual isolation. The film's dialogue provides a chilling reflection of the racialized rhetoric of 1970s drug policy. Don Zaluchi's infamous statement "I believe... that the more dangerous drugs will be distributed in the African American community... they're unethical and soulless animals" mirrors the historical reality that drug laws have been used to target and marginalize Chinese immigrants, Latinos, and Southern Black people since the 19th century. This "Zaluchi mindset" identifies certain groups as "others" whose devastation by drugs is deemed an acceptable social cost.

The "War on Drugs" was often a "proxy war" against groups who held political beliefs differing from the administrations. Similarly, in the film, the drug trade is not merely a criminal enterprise but a tool of political and social warfare. The "unconscious racism" noted by legal scholars in the sentencing disparities between "crack" and "powder" cocaine has its thematic precursor in the film's "controlled foray" into the narcotics market, aimed specifically at those outside the "white" Italian American enclave.

3.5. The Godfather and the French Connection: Reality Versus Domestic Focus

The Godfather (1972) treats the heroin trade not merely as an economic or dramatic tool, but as a central element that defines the moral and social framework of the Corleone family. According to Peter Lev, rather than directly reflecting the complexities of the international heroin trade, the film focuses on the narrow, local decisions of the Corleone family. This strategic narrowing enhances the narrative's dramatic intensity and character-driven depth. John Markert emphasizes that this approach, through the film, demonstrates that heroin is not merely a transnational criminal element but a central function in determining the balance of power and moral hierarchy within the family (Markert 120).

In the early 1970s, the majority of the illicit heroin supply in the US was sourced through the transnational French Connection network, based in Marseille. Andrew Tartaglino, Deputy Director of the BNDD (precursor to the DEA), identified France in 1967 as "the source of over 75% of heroin consumption in the US" (Lev 224). However, The Godfather removes this international context from the dramatic narrative. Lev states that this is a deliberate strategy to focus the film on the characters and the moral choices within the family (Lev 225). Markert states that this choice enhances the film's dramatic rhythm and allows the audience to focus on the family tragedy (Markert 121). Vito Corleone's refusal to enter the heroin trade emphasizes both the character's moral integrity and his responsibilities to his family. According to Lev, Vito's decision allows the audience to understand the moral and social destructiveness of drugs and positions heroin as a "very dirty" and destructive substance (Lev 215). Markert emphasizes that Vito's approach constructs him as a sympathetic criminal, enabling the audience to empathize despite the family's other illegal activities (Markert 112).

The scene structure, character interactions, and cinematography reinforce the dramatic and moral impact of heroin. The conflict with Sollozzo is dramatized through the family's power balance and Vito's violation of moral boundaries. Sonny Corleone's aggressive and reckless drug addiction symbolizes his character's impatience and recklessness; this approach serves as a narrative element that directly prepares for his tragic ending (Lev 218). Michael Corleone's calculated acceptance of heroin is explored on a different level: with Vito's death and his assumption of leadership of the family, Michael maximizes not only his commercial interests but also his moral compromises, transforming into a ruthless leader (Markert 115). Cinematographically, the dark lighting, close-ups, and shadowy location designs used in heroin-related scenes in the film emphasize the characters' conflicts of guilt and morality. Lev argues that

these techniques reinforce the negative value of heroin in cinema, presenting the drug not only as an individual but also as a societal threat (Lev 216). Markert, on the other hand, emphasizes that the dramatic and symbolic function of heroin makes the family tragedy and moral disintegration in the film visible (Markert 116). The Godfather also creates a deliberate distance between the reality of the international heroin market and the dramatic narrative. Lev states that this increases the dramatic intensity of the film and allows the audience to focus on the family tragedy and moral collapse (Lev 225). According to Markert, this approach creates a narrative that emphasizes the destructive effects of heroin on family and social structures, regardless of its origins (Markert 123).

As a result, The Godfather makes heroin a central element of family moral collapse and dramatic tragedy, regardless of the complexities of international trafficking. Lev considers this approach typical of 1970s American cinema, which positions heroin as absolute evil (Lev 220). Markert, on the other hand, emphasizes that this consistently negative representation of heroin conveys a powerful message to the audience about the inevitable social and familial destruction of drugs (Markert 116).

Chapter 4. The French Connection: A Socio-Political Analysis of Narcotic Networks in 1971

The release of William Friedkin's *the French Connection* (1971) marked a transformative moment in both American cinematic history and the evolution of federal drug policy. It was a year that witnessed the convergence of the New Hollywood aesthetic; characterized by grit, moral ambiguity, and documentary-style realism and a radical shift in governmental posture toward the illicit drug trade. This analysis explores the complex interplay between the film's narrative construction, its visceral character portrayals, and the historical reality of the Marseille-based heroin networks that dominated the mid-twentieth century. By dissecting the struggles of Detectives Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle and Buddy "Cloudy" Russo, the sophisticated operations of the Corsican Mafia, and the systemic corruption that allowed such networks to flourish, one can appreciate the film as both a gripping police procedural and a somber reflection of a society on a collision course with its own moral decay.

The historical backdrop against which the film was released is essential for understanding its cultural weight. Just months before the movie's premiere, President Richard Nixon declared drug abuse to be "public enemy number one" in the United States, vowing a massive offensive against narcotics trafficking. This declaration transitioned the drug problem from a public health issue managed by the Surgeon General to a justice-centric priority under the Department of Justice, effectively setting the stage for the militarization of drug enforcement. *The French Connection* provided the burgeoning War on Drugs with its first cinematic myth, a narrative that justified extreme force and the erosion of civil rights in the face of an existential "foreign plague" embodied by the heroin trade.

The film's plot is a fictionalized account of the 1961–1962 investigation conducted by NYPD detectives Eddie Egan and Sonny Grosso. While the real-life operation resulted in the seizure of approximately 246 pounds of heroin smuggled into New York inside the panels of a 1960 Buick, Friedkin's adaptation heightens the stakes and the pace, reflecting the anxieties of 1971 rather than the relatively more stable early 1960s. By utilizing a cinema verité style, Friedkin avoided the polished tropes of the classic Hollywood police movie, instead delivering a "you-are-there" experience that felt indistinguishable from reality to many contemporary viewers.

At the center of *The French Connection* is Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle, a character whose brutal, obsessive, and often sociopathic behavior redefined the cinematic image of the police officer. Portrayed by Gene Hackman in an Academy Award-winning performance, Doyle is the antithesis of the traditional moral hero. He is established early in the film as an undercover officer with a "volcanic temper," first appearing in the guise of a disheveled Santa Claus to bait a street dealer. This introduction immediately signals the film's subversion of authority; the symbol of benevolence is weaponized for a gritty shakedown, a metaphor for a police force that has abandoned public service in favor of an all-consuming pursuit of criminals. Doyle is characterized by "pernicious pragmatism" and a reliance on instinct over protocol. His investigatory work is driven not by a sophisticated understanding of law, but by "brilliant hunches" that frequently cross the line into illegality. This obsession is framed as a personal psychosis, a "mad dog" mentality that feeds off the grimy New York City streets for both energy and guidance. Academic analysis suggests that Friedkin intentionally emphasized Doyle's flaws; his racism, his penchant for violence, and his disregard for human life, to make him a real character who resonated with a public that was increasingly frightened by the perceived breakdown of urban social order.

Doyle’s struggle is profoundly internal as much as it is physical. He lives a life of isolation, devoid of any personal connection outside of his professional partnership with Buddy Russo. His existence is defined by the "chase," which is less about the capture of a criminal and more about the heart of his identity as a primal sentry at odds with the world. This is most evident in the legendary car-versus-train sequence. In his quest to intercept the hitman Pierre Nicoli, Doyle navigates crowded Brooklyn streets at seventy miles per hour, endangering dozens of innocent civilians. The ferocity of this scene mirrors Doyle’s internal state: an adrenaline-fueled, unhinged drive that justifies any cost to "crack the case".

Sociologically, Doyle represents a populist hero for the lower-middle class, a "blue-collar narc" who lives in public housing and suffers through freezing stakeouts while eating rancid pizza. His animosity toward the primary antagonist, Alain Charnier, is fueled by a palpable class resentment. Charnier represents the "refined class" of international criminal, living in a seaside villa and enjoying multi-course meals while Doyle freezes on a sidewalk. This disparity reinforces the film's theme of the "dogged white innocent" outmatched by a sophisticated, monied underworld, a motif that was used to justify systematic police brutality as a necessary defense against a powerful, corrupting foreign influence.

Buddy "Cloudy" Russo, played by Roy Scheider, serves as the essential level-headed counterbalance to Doyle’s volatility. While Doyle is the "bad cop" who disregards the rules, Russo is the "good cop" who follows them, yet he remains inextricably linked to Doyle’s crusade. Their relationship exemplifies the importance of ensemble chemistry in portraying realistic police work, but it also highlights the "porous line" between the enforcer and the criminal in an urban environment defined by decay. Russo’s role is that of the professional who facilitates Doyle’s obsessions. He is the one who monitors the technical details, provides tactical support, and

occasionally expresses horror when Doyle's violence exceeds even the lax standards of the NYPD narcotics unit. For instance, when Doyle accidentally shoots a federal agent during the final warehouse confrontation, Russo is visibly traumatized, yet Doyle simply pushes forward into the darkness, indifferent to the human loss. This dynamic suggests that the "macho police subculture" of the 1970s did not merely consist of loose cannons but was sustained by pragmatic officers who tolerated, and thus validated, the excesses of their partners in exchange for results.

In the context of the early 1970s, Russo represents the "Silent Majority's" complicity in the escalation of the War on Drugs. He is a representative of a middle class that envies the ruling elite while simultaneously despising the poor, as symbolized by the cops' aggressive behavior in African American bars. Russo and Doyle's shakedown of the Oasis bar patrons illustrate this point: they terrorize citizens who are minding their own business, using racial slurs and physical intimidation to assert dominance, all while focusing on a "bigger score" that will never actually materialize into a definitive victory. Russo's support of Doyle, despite his partner's manifest instability, mirrors the historical shift in public sentiment that prioritized "law and order" over the protection of individual civil liberties.

Alain Charnier, referred to as "Frog One" by detectives, is portrayed as the quintessential international drug kingpin. Unlike the "colorful" mobster caricatures of earlier cinema, Fernando Rey's Charnier is a suave, intelligent, and highly calculated businessman who views heroin trafficking as a logical extension of global commerce. His elusiveness and sophistication stand in stark contrast to the American detectives' roughness, adding an international dimension to the narrative that highlights the cross-cultural nature of the narcotics trade.

Charnier embodies what academic critics have called "heartless and elusive evil". He is a profiteer who operates without conscience, using his wealth and social standing to insulate himself from the legal consequences of his actions. The film effectively uses the "cat-and-mouse" game between Charnier and Doyle to illustrate the limitations of the NYPD; in the subway tailing sequence, Charnier's superior intellect and composure allow him to outmaneuver Doyle, culminating in a mocking nod that leaves the detective stranded and humiliated. This moment serves as a metaphor for the broader inability of local law enforcement to contain a decentralized, international threat. The portrayal of Charnier as a "foreign plague" carrying professional wickedness into the United States was a powerful propaganda tool during the Nixon era. By framing the drug lord as a threat to national security, the film justified the "all-out offensive" promised by the government. Historically, Charnier was based on Jean Jehan, a high-level runner for the Marseille underworld who persuaded Jacques Angelvin to smuggle heroin inside a luxury car. In the film, Charnier's wealth and his idyllic lifestyle in Marseille are contrasted with the "hellish" landscape of New York, reinforcing the theme of class conflict and the notion that foreigners were preying on American vulnerability. The term "The French Connection" refers to what was historically the world's most significant heroin manufacturing and distribution network between the post-war period and the mid-1970s. Based in Marseille and run by the Corsican Mafia, the network sourced morphine base from Turkish poppy fields and refined it in clandestine laboratories hidden throughout the hinterland of Provence. By 1967, the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) identified France as the source of over 75% of the heroin consumed in the United States.

Contrary to the film's portrayal of a singular, monolithic hierarchy, the historical reality was a complex and multifaceted social configuration. The network was not a centralized

organization under a single command, but rather a joint arrangement between competing Corsican families who shared linguistic and cultural ties. Key figures in this underworld included Jean-Baptiste Croce, the real network boss, and his associates Joseph Mari and Étienne Mosca. These groups operated as commercial partners or sub-contractors for the American Cosa Nostra, which was itself divided into twenty-eight different families across the United States. The mechanics of the smuggling were as diverse as the groups involved. Heroin was hidden in false-bottomed suitcases, the cargo holds of ships, and, most famously, the rocker panels of large American automobiles. The 1962 Angelvin affair, which served as the inspiration for the film, involved fifty kilograms of heroin hidden in a Buick. By the time the film was released in 1971, the landscape had changed significantly; heroin addiction had become a massive social problem in the United States, with overdoses accounting for 100,000 deaths in 1970 alone. Diplomatic tensions between the United States and France reached a fever pitch during this period. Nixon's 1969 letter to President Georges Pompidou urged strong action, but the French response was characterized by what the Americans perceived as "inertia" and "political collusion". Protests were held at the French Consulate in New York with placards reading "France Manufactures Heroin" and "Heroin Kills". It was not until 1971, under Interior Minister Raymond Marcellin, that France significantly increased its efforts, replacing the heads of its narcotics brigades and employing American "sniffer-truck" technology to detect the acetic anhydride fumes essential for heroin production.

The French Connection delves deeply into the theme of corruption, which operates on both localized and international levels. On the street level, Doyle and Russo represent the "dirty cop" archetype, characterized by a moral decay that justifies illegal tactics in pursuit of a perceived greater good. The film suggests that police brutality is an outgrowth of personal psychosis, but it also implies that such behavior is systemic within an institution that has become as "decrepit" as

the city it serves. The detectives' willingness to beat suspects, plant evidence, and conduct unauthorized surveillance is presented not as a failure of policy, but as a "pernicious pragmatism" required to fight a war that the official system is failing to win. Historically, the suspicion of high-level corruption was even more pervasive. The French underworld enjoyed the support of local socialist governments, such as that led by Gaston Deferre in Marseille, who reportedly turned a blind eye to Mafia activities in exchange for political support and muscle to combat communist trade unions. More explosively, allegations existed that drug trafficking networks had infiltrated the French secret service (SDECE) and the Civic Action Service (SAC), a private security group for the Gaullist party. These shadowy agents were accused of using heroin proceeds to finance clandestine political activities in the United States through secret service channels, reflecting a deep-seated anti-Americanism within certain sectors of the French state machine. The "Delouette Affair" of 1971 served as a historical manifestation of these fears. Roger Delouette, arrested in New Jersey with heroin hidden in his campervan, claimed he was an agent of the SDECE working for Colonel Paul Fournier. While it later emerged that Delouette was a "contracted agent" who had gone rogue, the affair exploded like a "bomb" across the Atlantic, pitting American drug control agencies against their French counterparts and reinforcing the perception of the French Connection as a conspiracy protected by the public authorities. This sense of systemic failure is echoed in the film's conclusion, where the most significant criminal figures escape punishment, and the detectives are left firing at shadows in an empty warehouse.

Friedkin's New York is not a "love letter" to the city's beauty, but a "gritty masterpiece" of urban decay. The landscape is portrayed as a hellish, dark, and cold environment characterized by filth and unkept streets. Academic critics have labeled this the "cinema of urban despair," a genre that emerged in the early 1970s to reflect the loss of authoritarian structures and the perceived

failure of 1960s social programs. The city is depicted as a "wilderness" where life is cheap, and social order has completely disintegrated.

The film's cinematography, led by Owen Roizman, uses handheld cameras and naturalistic lighting to immerse the viewer in this "festering" environment. The use of location shooting in both Marseille and New York highlights the disparity between the two settings: Marseille is "idyllic" and sun-drenched, while New York is a "self-destructive limbo" characterized by noise and foul weather. This visual scheme reinforces the narrative's moral bleakness; in a city where bums and drug addicts linger in nearly every frame, the pursuit of a whale-sized heroin shipment becomes an exercise in futility. The "Poughkeepsie" shakedown sequence is a key example of how the film uses the urban environment to define its characters. Doyle and Russo engage in a "word salad" interrogation technique intended to disorient their suspects, reflecting the manipulation of language and the loss of civil discourse in a polarized society. By treating the African American patrons of the Oasis bar as "objects to be acted upon," the film mirrors the contemporary racial tropes that stereotyped minority communities as drug-infested and criminal. Doyle's racism is not presented as an aberration but as an integral part of a "complex personality" shaped by the harsh realities of urban policing.

The French Connection acted as a "sly political comment" on the American zeitgeist of the pre-Watergate era. During this period, the public's trust in institutional authority was eroding, influenced by the horrors of the Vietnam War and the My Lai massacre. In response to this instability, Nixon's 1971 declaration of the War on Drugs provided the country with a new, identifiable enemy: the international drug trafficker. This "War" united pop culture and law enforcement for a common purpose, justifying the "audience-thrilling rule-breaking" those characters like Popeye Doyle performed on screen. The government's approach during the 1970s

was characterized by a demand for "vigor" and "repression". The establishment of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1973 was the culmination of this policy, consolidating agents from the BNDD, Customs, and the CIA into a "super agency" designed to tackle all aspects of the drug problem. However, academic research suggests that these efforts were largely a failure; the temporary shortage of heroin caused by interdiction was quickly compensated for by methadone and new distribution systems from Mexico and Southeast Asia. The movie's portrayal of the drug trade as a purely criminal venture, detached from international capitalism, reinforced the government's narrative of a "foreign plague" that could be eradicated through police force. While the actual policy quietly enhanced methadone treatment as a harm reduction measure, the film focused exclusively on the "spectacle of violent police activities". This portrayal confirmed the public's perception that narcotics dealers were "Grade A poisoners" whose existence justified the erosion of basic rights and the use of extreme force.

A compelling sociological layer of the film is the symbolic representation of class conflict. Doyle and Russo represent the middle class (or the upwardly mobile petite bourgeoisie) who envy the ruling class while despising the poor. The conflict between the cops and the Mafia, and between the cops and the African American junkies; symbolizes broader tensions in American society. Doyle's "avuncular phoniness", pretending to be kind to Black children while using racial slurs behind their backs, reveals the fake kindness of a middle class that ultimately keeps the social structure intact through the application of force. The film emphasizes the disparity in consumption between the detectives and the criminals. In a famously ironic scene, Doyle stands on a freezing street corner eating a greasy slice of pizza while Charnier consumes a multi-course feast inside a warm, elegant restaurant. This visual contrast underscores Doyle's class resentment and his desire to supplant the ruling class he hunts. The heroin itself is presented as a commodity, an "exchange

value" for the traffickers and a "use-value" for the addicts who need it to escape their oppression. By focusing on the "flashy markers" of success, luxury cars, fine suits, and expensive meals; the film charts the power dynamics of the underworld hierarchy and the cops' obsession with dismantling it. Doyle's own addictions are also highlighted as a form of hypocrisy. While he judges and attacks junkies for altering their consciousness, he is himself an alcoholic who "likes his drinks double" and pursues sexual encounters with the same predatory energy he brings to his job. This hypocrisy suggests that the line between the enforcer and the criminal is not defined by morality, but by the power Doyle projects onto his targets. The detective is "projecting his own desire for power over others" onto Charnier, a realization that becomes clear in the film's final moments of internal defeat.

The conclusion of *The French Connection* is one of the most nihilistic and bleak endings in cinema. After the massive shootout in the warehouse, Doyle pursues Charnier into the darkness, leaving a dead colleague in his wake. The pursuit proves futile; Charnier escapes, and Doyle is left firing his gun at shadows. The film ends on an abrupt freezing frame of the dark, wet interior of the building, followed by title cards that reveal the light sentences, or lack thereof, for the central conspirators. This "illusory victory" accurately reflects the historical reality of the 1970s War on Drugs. While the joint transatlantic effort led to major successes, such as the 1972 seizure of 425 kilograms of heroin on the ship "Le caprice des temps," the network was never fully dismantled. The Corsican godfathers simply retreated, waiting for the political pressure to subside before reconfiguring their operations into more dispersed, decentralized markets. The emergence of the "user-pusher" and the relocation of laboratories outside of France made the market even more difficult to quash, rendering the centralized hierarchical model of the early 70s obsolete. The failure of the judiciary depicted in the film, where the wealthy financier Joel Weinstock walks free,

mirrors the perceived corruption and institutional fragility of the pre-Watergate era. Doyle's obsession with catching the "big score" ultimately leads to his moral demise; he becomes "indistinguishable from the very gang members he hunts," walking through the "gates of hell" into a life defined by bipartisan carnage and a total loss of purpose. The film's "unvarnished portrayal" of a country in a frantic search for its moral center remains its most potent and enduring message. William Friedkin's directorial approach to *The French Connection* was revolutionary for its time, bringing a documentary-style realism to the action genre that had previously been dominated by the stylized tropes of the Western and the war film. Influenced by the French New Wave and his own background in nonfiction television, Friedkin employed a "cinema verité sense of spontaneity" that made the film feel urgent and immersive. He instructed his cameramen to shoot as if they "didn't know what was gonna happen next," capturing scenes with a rawness that earned the film immense critical acclaim.

The cinematography by Owen Roizman was equally influential, utilizing techniques such as "pushing the negative" for night exteriors to create a stark, high contrast look that emphasized the "urban decay" of New York. Much of the film was shot with handheld cameras on location, avoiding the controlled environments of the studio. The production often filmed in real traffic without the control of lights, adding a layer of genuine danger and hypervigilance to the performances. The film's editing, performed by Gerald Green, violated traditional continuity to create a sense of jarring excitement and "complete unhinged chaos". This is most evident in the car chase, which is edited as a "mosaic of filmed footage" rather than a linear sequence, reassembling speed and tension to tell a coherent story through the act of pursuit. This commitment to authenticity extended to the casting; Friedkin used approximately 100 real New York police officers as extras, and the real-life detectives Egan and Grosso served as technical advisors and

actors on the set. *The French Connection* is a prime example of the "genre-bending" films that characterized the 1970s. It exploited the audience's habitual responses to the police-detective formula, only to undermine those expectations with a bleak and unsettling outcome. By "thawing out cop clichés" and "slashing them to bits," Friedkin created a film that was as amoral, violent, and frightening as its hero. This shift reflected a broader movement in American cinema that saw the transition from classic heroes to darker, more conflicted anti-heroes who lived on the edge of society.

This era, known as the Hollywood Renaissance or New Hollywood, saw a shift toward more realistic, adult-oriented films that captured the social anxieties of the time. The collapse of the studio system and the rise of independent production allowed for greater creative freedom, enabling directors like Friedkin to interrogate the "cynical and nihilistic dimensions" of American institutions. *The French Connection* remains a landmark in this movement, not only for its technical achievements but for its "unflinching reflection" of a polarized reality where good does not always triumph over evil.

The film's selection for preservation in the National Film Registry underscores its cultural and historical significance. It captured a pervasive nihilist mindset that remains relevant today, particularly in its exploration of unchecked police brutality and the "cracks in institutions" dedicated to social and political justice. By portraying a policeman as a psycho and a city in a state of terminal decline, Friedkin provided an enduring "guide to the flip side of the American Dream," a world where the pursuit of an elusive "Grade A poison" leads only to internal defeat and the sound of a singular, lonely gunshot.

Chapter 5: Heroin, Propaganda, and the State Response: French Connection 2 (1975)

The 1975 film French Connection II, an example of American cinema's crime and drug-themed productions of the 1970s, particularly emphasizes the negative effects of heroin on society, arguing for the necessity of strong state intervention. Unlike The Godfather series, this film presents heroin not only as a tool of the criminal world but also as a threat that justifies the state's harsh intervention. The film centers on Popeye Doyle, the French policeman Jean-Pierre Melville's character, and his personal quest for vengeance against French drug cartels. Doyle's obsessive and violent approach symbolizes the devastation heroin wreaks on both the individual and societal levels. In this context, the film portrays heroin not only as a matter of individual addiction but also as a threat to national security.

As Peter Lev points out in his work *American Film of the 1970s: Conficting Visions (2000)*, by focusing on social problems and individual conflicts, reveals to the audience both the characters' inner worlds and the general state of society. Films from this period often depict individual protagonists' struggles against social problems while simultaneously questioning the state's stance on these problems. The film's themes of violence and revenge emphasize the necessity of a harsh state stance against drugs. However, this approach also carries the risk of violating individual rights and freedoms. This leads us to question the impact of the state's war on heroin on individual freedoms. Consequently, French Connection II presents heroin not only as a drug but also as a threat that justifies the state's harsh intervention. This approach invites the audience to question both the state's war on heroin and its impact on individual freedoms.

A central and horrifying element of *The French Connection II* is the forced addiction of Popeye Doyle. Captured by Charnier's henchmen and held in the rundown Hotel Colonnades (formerly the Hotel de Tanger), Doyle is systematically injected with heroin to break his will and compel a confession. This plot point is a radical departure from traditional cinematic tropes of addiction. Historically, movies have often used addiction as a narrative tool to illustrate a "Road to Ruin", a voluntary downward spiral resulting from a lack of moral fortitude. By making the addiction forced, Frankenheimer subverts this trope, reframing the drug not as a seductive vice but as a chemical weapon of war.

This depiction of forced addiction provides a visceral analysis of the power of heroin to abolish free will, a concept that was a subject of intense debate in the 1970s legal and medical systems. By stripping Doyle of his agency, the film underscores the "incalculable burden" of addiction mentioned in the Ford administration's White Paper, which noted the "ruined lives" and "lost productivity" associated with the heroin trade. The vulnerability Doyle experiences as a "junkie" is a direct indictment of the trade's ruthlessness; Charnier, the sophisticated "French Connection," is willing to destroy the human mind to protect his commercial interests.

The mechanics of this forced addiction are portrayed with a grim, industrial efficiency. Doyle is kept in a state of semi-consciousness, his reality reduced to the sidewalk tiles of the hotel and the needle of his captors. This sequence serves to tear the character "down to the bone," removing the protective layer of his "blue-collar machismo" and exposing a fragile, stubborn masculinity. The film's willingness to explore this "moral ambiguity" and "human frailty" was a daring choice for the era, challenging the audience to root for a hero who has succumbed to the very substance he was sworn to eradicate.

The middle act of the film, which documents Doyle's cold-turkey withdrawal in a Marseille police basement, is widely regarded as one of the most powerful and "wrenching" depictions of detox in cinematic history. Gene Hackman's performance captures the physical and psychological agony of the process, characterized by tremors, delirium, and a total loss of dignity. This "home-made detox" is overseen by Inspector Barthélémy, Doyle's French counterpart, who keeps the process secret to avoid ruining Doyle's reputation and career.

This sequence serves as a bridge between the action-thriller elements of the film and its deeper character study. During his withdrawal, Doyle delivers an emotionally naked monologue about his past as a minor-league baseball player, lamenting the choices that led him to the police force rather than the glory of the Yankee Stadium. This moment of "pathetic" humanity highlights the theme of the "ugly American" out of his element, a man whose identity is entirely dependent on his institutional role, which has now failed him.

The realism of the withdrawal scene reflects the growing public awareness of the heroin epidemic in urban centers like New York and Marseille. By 1970, heroin overdoses accounted for 100,000 deaths in the United States, and New York State alone had approximately 130,000 addicts. The film's portrayal of withdrawal as an "excruciating step-by-step" process of willpower echoes the 1975 White Paper's emphasis on the need for "vocational rehabilitation" and the recognition that "compulsive users" pose a significant risk to society. However, the film remains skeptical of systemic solutions, portraying recovery as a lonely, brutal battle of the individual will.

The French Connection II offers a detailed, albeit fictionalized, look at the mechanics of the international heroin trade. A crucial scene, which John Frankenheimer noted was constructed with the assistance of the Corsican Mafia, involves the building of a functioning heroin laboratory

where the drug is liquefied and canned as "bouillabaisse", a traditional Marseille fish soup. This detail serves as a metaphor for the way the illegal trade infiltrates and perverts local cultural and commercial structures.

Historically, the Marseille labs were hidden in the hinterlands of Provence, using acetic anhydride to transform morphine base into the high-purity white heroin that became the hallmark of the Marseille chemists. The film's depiction of the "heroin kingpin" Alain Charnier as an upper-class, polished figure who moves comfortably between country estates and urban laboratories reflects the real-world perception of the drug "barons" as untouchable figures protected by wealth and bank accounts. Charnier represents the "sophisticated puppet master" whose operations are a "pretty slick operation" that manages to keep pace with international law enforcement.

The film also captures the transnational nature of the trade, showing Charnier's men paying Japanese ship captains for smuggling and discussing shipments with American generals. This aligns with the historical reality of the "polyarchic" heroin trade, where Marseille was merely a central link in a chain that stretched from the poppy fields of Turkey and Lebanon to the distributors of the Cosa Nostra in New York. The use of diplomatic pouches and legitimate commercial shipping as cover was a hallmark of the real French Connection, as evidenced by the 1960 arrest of the Guatemalan ambassador to the Benelux countries.

The portrayal of Marseille in the film is central to its thematic exploration of urban decay and the global reach of the drug trade. Unlike the "postcard" subjects of many French films, Frankenheimer treats Marseille as a "strange, ugly beast". The city is depicted as "Skag city," a place of crumbling facades, festering alleys, and streets "greasy with grime and despair". This "gritty, realistic, and even dour" look is a hallmark of 1970s Hollywood cinematography, reflecting

a departure from escapism toward a documentary-like focus on the seamy underbelly of the city. Marseille functions as a psychological mirror for Doyle's own "dark odyssey". As a "fish-out-of-water," Doyle's disregard for French culture and his aggressive tactics lead him through the Arab Quarter and the waterfront, areas characterized by "widespread poverty and seediness". The city is presented as a labyrinth where the "French Connection" has deep roots, and where the "thieves, cutthroats, and other undesirables" throngs the narrow alleys. This cinematic geography reinforces the theme of "racism and xenophobia" or "blame the other," as the American detective struggles against a foreign environment he perceives as inherently corrupt and lazy. This depiction has historical echoes in the "Francophobia" that gripped the United States in the early 1970s, where demonstrators in front of the French Consulate brandished placards reading "France Manufactures Heroin". The film's focus on the seedy Marseille streets taps into this public sentiment, framing the city as the source of America's "modern curse". However, by also showing the incompetence and "laziness" of the Marseille police through Doyle's biased eyes, the film complicates the narrative, suggesting that the "war on drugs" is as much a battle against administrative inertia as it is against the traffickers.

Gene Hackman's reprise of the role of Popeye Doyle in 1975 provides one of the era's most in-depth studies of "fragile, stubborn, toxic masculinity". In the first film, Doyle was an "obsessed narcotics cop," a "blue-collar machismo" figure whose racism and brutality were framed as necessary evils in the fight against crime. In the sequel, Frankenheimer and Hackman refuse to "soften" the character, instead using the plot to "tear the character down to the bone". Doyle remains "reprehensible for a lot of reasons", a bully, a racist, and an alcoholic who constantly "throws his weight around". His forced addiction and subsequent withdrawal serve to "humanize" him, not by making him more likable, but by making him more "pathetic" and vulnerable. The

film’s refusal to turn Doyle into a "generically rousing, less problematic hero figure" reflects the broader shift in 1970s cinema from the "iconoclastic, scruffy outsiders" of the early years to characters who are "fated to failure" or trapped within an unforgiving system. Doyle’s "temper tantrums" and his "air of superiority" are shown to be hollow defenses for a man who has lost everything, including his career and his self-control. This characterization aligns with the public mood of 1975, a time of deep "political cynicism" following the Watergate scandal and the end of the Vietnam War. Doyle is a "secret agent as a social symptom," a man who represents the "carnage" of the American system. His final confrontation with Charnier is not a triumph of justice but a "decisive bang" of personal vengeance that leaves the broader problem of the heroin trade untouched. The film’s conclusion, where Doyle finally kills Charnier, is a "closed ending" that nonetheless leaves the viewer with a sense of "bleak desperation".

The French Connection II, an example of American cinema's crime and drug-themed productions of the 1970s, particularly emphasizes the negative effects of heroin on society, arguing for the need for strong state intervention (Lev 112). Unlike The Godfather series, this film presents heroin not only as a tool of the criminal world but also as a threat that justifies harsh state intervention (Lev 115). The film centers on Popeye Doyle, the character of French police officer Jean-Pierre Melville, and his personal quest for vengeance against French drug cartels (Markert 54). Doyle's obsessive and violent approach symbolizes the devastation heroin wreaks on both the individual and societal levels. In this context, the film presents heroin not only as an individual addiction but also as a threat to national security (Lev 118). Heroin was presented as an absolute and destructive evil in 1970s American cinema, often associated with inevitable death (Lev 134). This framework ideologically legitimized Detective Popeye Doyle's aggressive and often illegal methods. Doyle's obsessive and systematic pursuit was part of a narrative that presented heroin not

only as an individual addiction but as an existential threat to society (Lev 136). The effort to stop Alain Charnier (Fernando Rey) was portrayed as a mission requiring transgressions within the law; here, Doyle was portrayed as a hero enforcing his own sense of justice (Markert 78).

The film reinforced the moral panic fueled by the fact that France provided 75% of heroin exports to the United States in the 1970s. This data made Doyle's actions seem both justified and necessary to the audience. The threat of heroin was presented not merely as an individual health problem but as an organized criminal element endangering national security. This presentation cinematically legitimized police overreach (Markert 80). Furthermore, the film employed the theme of police vigilantism as a central narrative device. Doyle's method represented a personal understanding of justice aimed at punishing crime rather than enforcing the law. This demonstrated to the audience the necessity of a harsh state intervention against drugs while also making them aware of the risks of violating individual rights and freedoms (Lev 140). Thus, French Connection II positioned heroin not only as an individual addiction problem but also as a social crisis that legitimized police and state actions. With this dramatic structure, the film both made the audience understand the dangers of heroin and, through cinematic language, presented the necessity of state intervention. Doyle's character presented a hero who legitimized achieving goals through illegal means, while centralizing the threat of heroin, providing the audience with a clear and powerful antagonist (Markert 82). This structure supported anti-heroin discourse in American society during the Nixon era and transformed cinema into a propaganda tool.



Fig. 3. Still from *The French Connection 2*. Directed by John Frankenheimer. 20th Century Fox. 1975

French Connection II offered a different narrative dimension than its predecessor by incorporating scenes that more graphically and directly illustrated the devastating effects of heroin (Lev 152). The scene in which Popeye Doyle is forcibly injected with heroin by Alain Charnier, making him addicted, and then undergoing a painful withdrawal period served as visual and emotional proof of heroin's inescapable destructiveness (Markert 95). This scene simultaneously served as a public education and a propagandistic message for the audience; the horrific consequences of use were clearly demonstrated and public awareness was raised (Lev 155). Doyle's experience transformed the audience from passive observers to emotionally drawn-in participants. With this narrative technique, the film reinforced the "constantly negative" nature of heroin, emphasizing the inevitable cycle of death and destruction (Lev 157). The demonstration of

heroin's potential to incapacitate even a physically strong and determined police officer ideologically legitimized the state's need for aggressive and punitive drug intervention (Markert 98). Furthermore, these persistent negative representations solidified the role of heroin in cinema and paved the way for the social and political panic surrounding cocaine, which emerged as a new threat in the 1980s (Lev 160). By positioning heroin as a threat not only to individual addiction problems but also to organized crime and a social crisis that threatened national security, the film presented the audience with a clear and dramatic antagonist (Markert 100).

Chapter 6: The Architecture of Narcoculture: An Academic Deconstruction of Tony Montana, Cocaine Capitalism, and the Tragic Myth of the American Dream in Scarface (1983)

The 1983 film *Scarface*, directed by Brian De Palma and scripted by Oliver Stone, serves as a seminal text in the evolution of the American gangster genre, functioning as a high-velocity intersection of immigration politics, neoliberal economics, and the psychological disintegration of the individual. Set against the backdrop of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, the film transposes the classic Al Capone mythos into a "psychedelic" Miami characterized by pastel decadence and the pervasive influence of the cocaine trade. Tony Montana, portrayed by Al Pacino, emerges not merely as a criminal protagonist but as a complex manifestation of the subaltern's violent attempt to achieve social ascendance through the exploitation of illegitimate opportunities. The narrative trajectory of Montana provides an exhaustive case study in the mechanics of hubris, the alienating effects of capitalism, and the cultural anxieties surrounding the shift from the illicit alcohol trade of the 1930s to the high-powered narco-capitalism of the 1980s.

6.1. Historical Context and the Criminological Framework of the Marielito

The film’s inception is rooted in the geopolitical realities of early 1980s America, specifically the Mariel boatlift during which Fidel Castro permitted approximately 125,000 Cuban refugees to travel to Florida. Within this mass migration, a subset of ex-convicts and political pariahs, often referred to as "Marielitos", became the focus of intense social and political scrutiny, sparking a widespread "moral panic" that branded an entire population as "undesirable" and "criminal" (Bolivar). *Scarface* leverages this historical moment to construct a narrative about an "othered" population attempting to navigate the American legal and economic systems, representing what scholars call the "demonization of the immigrant other" (Bolivar; English). From

a criminological perspective, Tony Montana's rise is best understood through the lens of Cloward and Ohlin's Theory of Differential Opportunities. This theory suggests that entry into the criminal elite is not merely a consequence of the absence of legitimate opportunities but is fundamentally dependent on the availability of illegitimate ones (Tsiakalos). Montana's specific background as a Cuban immigrant with a history of military or carceral experience provided him with the "differential" skills, such as a willingness to commit political assassination, that made him an ideal recruit for established drug lords (Tsiakalos). His "jailfree card" was earned through the assassination of Emilio Rebenga, illustrating that his entry into the American economy was predicated on a structural need for political and criminal violence (Tsiakalos; "Scarface Directed by Brian De Palma").

Furthermore, Albert Cohen's Theory of Status Frustration explains Montana's internal motivations. Cohen suggests that young men who experience rejection from social and political institutions suffer from "status frustration," leading them to revolt against middle-class values to create new structures where they can increase their own prestige (Tsiakalos). Tony Montana does not merely embrace the American Dream; he performs a "perverted" version of it (Bucha; "Deconstructing Scarface"). While mainstream interpretations focus on diligence and assimilation, Montana's path is characterized by "reaction formation," where the inability to meet societal standards leads to an aggressive adoption of their inverse (Tsiakalos). His passion for money and power is described by scholars as a "teratogenesis"; the monstrous birth of a drug lord who views his illegal path as the only viable adjustment to a crushing social condition (Tsiakalos).

A defining feature of the character Tony Montana is his specific linguistic profile, which serves as a site of struggle between his status as an outsider and his assertion of power (Tousif). During his initial interrogation by U.S. immigration officers, the film establishes a profound

"power asymmetry" (Tousif). The officers utilize standard English syntax and official questioning patterns to reassert their authority, while Montana employs non-standard syntax, verbal ellipsis (such as omitting the copula verb "is" in "He dead"), and strategic ambiguity to maintain a "power stance" (Tousif). Montana's speech is characterized by an excessive use of the personal pronoun "I," which scholars suggest is a tool for self-emphasis and the creation of an inviolate individuality (Tousif; Anthony). His lexicon is a hybrid of Spanish slang such as "chivato" (snitch) and "puta" and profanity borrowed from Hollywood gangster archetypes (Tousif). Interestingly, Montana himself claims to have learned English from watching actors like Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney, suggesting that his identity is a construct of American pop culture even before he arrives on U.S. soil (Tousif). This imitation of masculine tropes allows him to "break the shell of being controlled," even as the state attempts to scale him down to a mere "refugee" status (Tousif).

The physical semiotics of this scene further enhance the analysis. Montana's brightly colored Hawaiian shirt, contrasted with the pale, standardized uniforms of the officers, signifies his status as an unassimilated "tourist" in the American system, yet his steady eye contact and smirks indicate a refusal to be intimidated by state authority (Tousif). The "beauty scar" on his face, which officers identify as a "code" for an assassin, functions as a "narcissistic scar", a physical manifestation of a childhood cause for his adult pathologies, likely rooted in early emotional neglect or trauma ("Analysis of 'Scarface'").

One of the most significant departures from the 1932 original film is the shift in the primary commodity being trafficked (Rutigliano; Bucha). While the Howard Hawks version focused on the illegal distribution of alcohol during Prohibition, the De Palma remake centers on the "Golden Age of Cocaine" in the early 1980s (English). This transition is more than a simple modernization; it reflects a fundamental change in the nature of capitalism and its associated pathologies (Bisbey).

Cocaine, unlike alcohol, is characterized by its ability to heighten the senses and provide a sensation of mastery and invulnerability (Banash). Scholarly analysis suggests that cocaine "legitimatizes the preferred modality of capitalist subjectivity", radical individuality and the pursuit of dominance (Banash). In *Scarface*, cocaine becomes an "allegory of capitalism," where the drive to "get high on your own supply" mirrors the insatiable demand of a consumption-based economy (Bisbey). The trajectory of Tony Montana implies that under capitalism, this self-consumption is inevitable because the system is based on the ever-expanding exploitation of universal human dissatisfaction (Bisbey).

The data on drug culture in the 1980s indicates a sharp transition in the public perception of cocaine. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the drug was viewed as a "glamour drug" of the elite, often compared to caviar or champagne (Miech). However, by the time of the film's release in 1983, this reputation was shifting toward an association with violence, urban decay, and desperation—a process known as being "culturally redefined as unhealthy" (Miech). *Scarface* captures this transition in real-time, portraying the "Dionysian" excesses of the era while simultaneously forecasting the "unsavory" reputation that would follow (English; Miech). This shift highlights a particular American anxiety: that the "gateway" of alcohol trade has opened the door to a more militarized, racialized, and uncontrollable "narcosphere" (Rutigliano; English).

The narrative trajectory of Tony Montana suggests that "getting high on your own supply" is the logical conclusion of a system that exploits human dissatisfaction (Bisbey). Scholars argue that cocaine addiction in the film is a parody of capitalism; it shores up a solipsistic sense of self closed off to identification with others (Bisbey). Tony Montana embodies the transformation of the raw coca plant into a commodified product, cocaine hydrochloride, a process that mirrors the broader movement of narco-capital through the modern financial system (Bisbey).

As the theorist Sayak Valencia suggests through the concept of "Gore Capitalism," subaltern men in Latin America often find that the only route to a "decent" life defined through consumption is the use of spectacular violence. Montana prefigures these "monstrous subjects," attempting to use violence to achieve the impossible goal of social ascendance through consumption (Bisbey). His use of "necro empowerment"; the use of violence to achieve status and power, confronts his situation of poverty and lack but ultimately legitimizes an underground economy that devours him.

The film meticulously portrays the movement of this narco-capital. Montage sequences show bills riffling through counting machines and sacks of money being delivered to banks, illustrating how drug profits are laundered into the legitimate economy (Bisbey). This "allegory of narco-capital" reflects the 1980s concern with money as the primary measure of success. Montana ironically criticizes the bankers and politicians who benefit from drug prohibition, arguing that the system itself is rigged to enrich the elite at the expense of the "bad guy" dealer (Bisbey). In this context, Tony is the "rich man's Jekyll," telling the truth about greed while the "good guys" hide their deficiencies behind a cloak of legality (u/DrFrantic; Bisbey).

The narrative of *Scarface* is structured around several "wonderfully tense set-pieces" that serve as symbolic milestones in Montana's rise and fall (Smith). Each scene reflects the broader themes of alienation, fragmentation, and the moral erosion inherent in the pursuit of power (Tsiakalos; "Analysis of 'Scarface'"). The encounter with Colombian dealers in a Sun Ray motel room is perhaps the most visceral scene in the film. While often criticized for its "hyperbolic" violence, the scene is technically designed to exploit the audience's imagination ("Film Review"). De Palma utilizes a "three-pronged light" and long uncut shots to heighten the sense of horror without showing the actual dismemberment ("Film Review"; "Scarface Directed by Brian De

Palma").

Symbolically, the chainsaw represents the "psychological fragmentation and alienation" caused by a ruthless capitalist system ("Analysis of 'Scarface'"). Angel's death is the literal price of entry into the criminal elite, and Montana's survival chained to a bathroom rod establishes him as a "heroic" but fundamentally broken figure ("Film Review"). The scene is pivotal as it introduces the word "yeyo" a slang term for cocaine ad-libbed by Pacino, marking Montana's official baptism into the cocaine trade (Anthony).

The Babylon Club serves as the "operating theatre" for the film's exploration of social class and gender ("Film Review"). It is here that Montana sets his sights on Elvira Hancock, the "Ice Queen" wife of his boss, Frank Lopez ("Scarface Script"; "Elvira Hancock Analysis"). Elvira represents the "unattainable" American ideal; a white, blonde, blue-eyed woman who serves as "social jewelry" to legitimize Montana's wealth ("Analysis of 'Scarface'"; Perry). Montana's pursuit of Elvira is not driven by love but by a desire for "social ascendance through consumption" (Bisbey). Elvira herself is a "woman self-contained by her addiction," a "shell of her former self" who mirrors Montana's own alienation ("Elvira Hancock Analysis"). Their eventual marriage is portrayed as a "moral dilemma leading to compliance," where the allure of the lifestyle is overshadowed by the "pollution" of their relationship (u/styxcruise).

The scene in Montana's "gargantuan gilded bathtub" marks a transition where the film becomes explicitly about drugs and their ability to induce paranoia and sabotage relationships ("How Oliver Stone"). In this "hideous black marble mansion," Tony is shown watching a multi-screen TV, smoking a cigar, and ignoring Elvira. This represents the "visceral, wish-fulfilling level" of consumption, where the "warm membrane of material bliss" becomes Tony's only reality.

His "bathtub philosophy" highlights his total narcissism; he trusts no one but himself, yet he is "haunted by his actions" even in his moment of highest luxury ("How Oliver Stone"; Bolivar).

During the scene where a drunken Montana creates a scandal in an upscale restaurant, he delivers his iconic "Bad Guy" monologue. This speech serves as an "indictment of the times," cutting through the "masquerades and posturing" of middle-class society ("Scarface: How Tony Montana"; u/DrFrantic). Tony argues that the "good guys" need people like him to point their fingers at so they can hide their own frustrations and inequities. He identifies as the "only one who tells the truth," Highlighting the hypocrisy of a society that consumes the products he provides while condemning the provider. This scene marks Tony's realization that despite his wealth, he is still "just a lonely man talking to himself," a status he revisits at the point of death (u/DrFrantic).

The final gunfight at the Montana villa is a "cross-genre" sequence that blends the gangster drama with the tropes of the horror film ("Film Review"; "Scarface (1983): Cinematographic Analysis"). Montana becomes a "monster" or a "creature" that must be "brought to its knees by all the forces of the universe" ("Film Review"; "Scarface (1983): Cinematographic Analysis"). His ability to "take in more bullets than is humanly possible" is compared to a climax in a "monster movie," ending only when a "lone shooter" delivers a merciful final blow ("Film Review"; "Scarface (1983): Cinematographic Analysis"). His body falling into the indoor fountain, beneath the globe reading "The World Is Yours" is a "stunning image" representing the "futility of his quest for power" (Bucha; "Scarface (1983) Breaking Down").

Montana's inevitable downfall is rooted in his "personality," which De Palma constructs as a Greek tragedy (Fish; "Scarface: How Tony Montana"). He is an extraordinary hero marked by "hamartia", a fatal flaw linked to hubris, or inordinate pride. His rise to power is methodical and

relentless, but it is his internal pathologies that lead to his isolation and eventual destruction (Tsiakalos; "Scarface: How Tony Montana"). Scholars have observed that Montana's criminal behavior is rooted in "narcissistic injury," likely stemming from "grossly unemphatic" parental responses in his childhood ("Analysis of 'Scarface'"). The eponymous scar on his face is interpreted as a "narcissistic scar", a physical manifestation of a childhood cause for his adult pathologies. As his wealth grows, he becomes increasingly solipsistic, losing the ability to identify with others and orienting himself entirely toward consumption and domination (Bisbey). This narcissism leads to a "crushing social isolation" where few people are seen as real friends, and loyalty is replaced by paranoid jealousy ("Analysis of 'Scarface'").

Montana's relationship with his family provides a deeper insight into his instability. His mother, Mama Montana, serves as a "moral counterpoint," rejecting his criminal money and viewing him as a "bad image" for hardworking Cubans (Tsiakalos; Peterson). This rejection creates a "narcissistic wound" that he attempts to heal by overprotecting his sister, Gina ("Analysis of 'Scarface'"; Peterson). Gina represents the "innocence" that Tony has sacrificed, and his relationship with her is characterized by an "almost incestuous passion" (Peterson; Fish). His jealousy, exemplified by his rage when seeing Gina with other men, suggests "passionate feelings stronger than two siblings should share" (Fish; Pecheneg). This fixation serves as the primary catalyst for his final collapse; by murdering his best friend Manny for being with Gina, Montana destroys the last remnants of his support system, leaving him "isolated and finally helpless" ("Scarface: How Tony Montana"; Ingenito). Gina's eventual "psychotic state" and her attempt to kill Tony before being shot by Sosa's men signify the total "sacrifice of innocence" Montana's lifestyle demanded (Tsiakalos; Peterson).

The depiction of drugs in *Scarface* is inextricably linked to the political and economic climate of the 1980s, specifically the policies of the Reagan administration and the "War on Drugs" (u/DrFrantic; "Scarface Script"). Tony Montana is described as "the American dream, perverted by the 80s and Reaganomics" (u/DrFrantic). The film acts as an "ur-text" of drug war culture, establishing conventions such as the allegorical portrayal of militarization (Bisbey). Montana's acquisition of "heavy artillery, high-powered surveillance, and rocket launchers" reflects the actual militarization of domestic life for subaltern populations in the United States during the 1980s (English). The use of weapons like Uzis and AK-47s in the film's narrative mirrors their increasing availability in real-world geopolitical struggles, such as the contra trade in Central America (Tsiakalos; English). The "War on Drugs" is portrayed as a "mass media event" where the state utilizes popular culture, including music, celebrities, and advertisements as weaponry (English; Ceja). Legislation like the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act introduced mandatory minimum sentences and allowed police to seize private property, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities while failing to curb the actual supply of narcotics (Ceja). Montana's "Say hello to my little friend" speech, utilizing an M16 with an under-mounted grenade launcher, is the ultimate cinematic realization of this militarization.

Cocaine heightens the user's radical and inviolate individuality, which is the "preferred modality of capitalist subjectivity" (Banash). In the 1980s, cocaine was synonymous with the "Dionysian era" of excess (English). The film highlights a "coked-out excess" that reflects the economic self-destruction of the era, a sentiment echoed in the idea that "getting high on your own supply" is the logical conclusion of a system that exploits human dissatisfaction (Bisbey; u/DrFrantic). Brian De Palma employs a "vividly frantic" and "ultra-stylized" cinematic approach to reflect the "bizarreness and excess" of Montana's world ("Scarface Directed by Brian De

Palma"; Anthony). The use of "extravagant swaths of crimson red" and a "grand operatic score" creates a sense of "delirious grandeur" that transcends the traditional gangster genre (Anthony; "Scarface (1983) Breaking Down").

The film's score, composed by Giorgio Moroder, is a critical component of its "hedonistic" identity (Fish; "Film Review"). Utilizing synthesizers like the Roland Jupiter-8 and Yamaha CS-80, Moroder created a "pumping" soundtrack that incorporates elements of disco, post-disco, and synth-rock ("Giorgio Moroder - Scarface"; "Scarface (soundtrack)"). The soundtrack is divided into two distinct musical components: upbeat tracks like "Push It to the Limit" that connote the "excessive lifestyle" of drugs and money, and "gloomy, melancholy" themes like "Tony's Theme" that signal "impending doom" ("Giorgio Moroder - Scarface"; Haga). Scholars suggest that the music is deliberately loud, symbolizing the "unworldly" nature of Montana's superhuman world of power and addiction ("Film Review"). The heavy use of subwoofers underlines the hedonistic theme, creating an "atmosphere of a seventies nightclub" that transcends the viewer into Montana's head (Fish; "Film Review").

De Palma's "exuberant" use of color and lighting helps define the 1980s Miami aesthetic. The "color coding" of the story, tinged blue for the East and vivid colors for the "narcosphere", suggests a didactic approach to visual storytelling (Banash). In the villa shootout, high-key lighting graphically demonstrates the "unbridled capitalism" and "unlimited cocaine" that fuel the climax ("Scarface: How Tony Montana"; "Film Review"). The swooping crane shots evoke the notion of military surveillance, further embedding the "Drug War" into the film's very form (English).

6.2. Gender Dynamics and the Objectification of the Female

The female characters in *Scarface* are central to the analysis of Montana's character and the era's societal anxieties ("Film Review"). They are portrayed as "victims" of Montana's hubris, yet they also serve as "mirrors" of his own dissatisfaction ("Scarface: How Tony Montana"; u/azul55). Elvira is often described as an "empty symbol" of the lifestyle ("Elvira Hancock Analysis"). Her "ice queen" exterior and "coked-out" detachment are seen as her only defense mechanism against a "shitty and dangerous" world where she is treated as a "trophy" or "social jewelry" ("Analysis of 'Scarface'"; Perry). The "pollution" of her womb, her refusal to have children with Montana, signifies a final rejection of his "tainted" version of the American Dream (Bisbey). Michelle Pfeiffer's "emaciated" look was a deliberate choice to portray the "cocaine chic" aesthetic that defined the era's drug-addicted ruling class. While Montana seeks to "get the women" as part of his quest for the world, the women in the film ultimately represent the limits of his power (Bucha). Elvira escapes him, choosing her own path away from his destructive excess, while Gina's death represents the total "sacrifice of innocence" that Montana's lifestyle demands (Peterson). The "mob wife aesthetic" embodied by Elvira provides a "raw insight into the dangers and allure" of the criminal lifestyle, illustrating the "ethical conundrums and personal conflicts" sparked by relentless ambition (Baker).

The ultimate fate of Tony Montana, face down in an extravagant fountain, remains one of the most "striking images" in cinema history ("Scarface (1983) Breaking Down"). It symbolizes the futility of his quest for power and the "meaningless void" of a life built on deceit and greed ("Scarface (1983) Breaking Down"; "Deconstructing Scarface"). The "gold sign" that remains intact, reading "The World Is Yours," mocks his lifeless body, confirming that the world he "worked so hard to control" was never truly his (Bucha; "Scarface (1983) Breaking Down").

Tony Montana stands as a "tragic figure" who succumbed to a lifestyle because he "had nothing else," yet remained "haunted by his actions" (Bolivar). Through its synthesis of linguistic power struggles, criminological opportunities, and the corrosive influence of cocaine capitalism, *Scarface* provides an exhaustive critique of the American Dream in the 1980s. It is a "morality tale" that warns of the "personal costs" of pure ambition, revealing that the "ascent to heaven" in a society plagued by drugs and dirty money is inevitably a "brutal struggle" ending in self-destruction ("Scarface: How Tony Montana"; Bolivar; Lancaster). Montana's downfall is not an accident of the plot, but a "remnant" of a culture that redefined cocaine from a "glamour drug" to a "social plague," leaving behind only the "blood, carnage, and dead bodies" of those who flew too close to the burning sun of their own ambition ("Scarface Script"; Miech; "Scarface (1983) Breaking Down").

6.3. Cocaine Ascendant: Materialism and Manic Downfall in Scarface (1983)

Scarface (1983) positioned cocaine as a turning point in the cinematic narrative; initially functioning as a harmless MacGuffin, the substance became the central force driving Tony Montana's excessive violence, uncontrolled ambition, and materialistic desires throughout the film (Lev 172). The film directly reflected the dramatic rise in cocaine use in the early 1980s and the anxiety American society felt towards these developments (Markert 112). Cocaine was presented not only as an individual drug problem but also as a catalyst for capitalist greed and social corruption (Lev 175).

Tony Montana's rise and fall dramatically illustrate the rapid and devastating effects cocaine has on the characters. By forcing the audience to witness Montana's loss of control and spiral into violence, the film experiences the individual and societal destructiveness of cocaine (Markert 115). Montana's materialism, violence, and manic behavior demonstrate that drugs not

only create addiction but also constitute a crisis that threatens social order. The film also represented cocaine differently from the heroin narrative of the 1970s. While the Erion narrative revolves around social destruction and moral panic, Scarface directly evokes the fear of drug-themed materialism and manic breakdown in the audience by associating cocaine with quick profit, power, and violence. This approach shifts the audience from a passive observer to an active experience of cocaine's social and individual effects. Finally, Scarface reflected not only individual tragedy but also the crises associated with economic greed, class differences, and drug policies in 1980s American society. By representing cocaine in a dramatic, didactic, and propagandistic manner, the film both conveyed a powerful moral message and reinforced social and political discourse).

6.4. The Cocaine Shift: From MacGuffin to Monetary Engine

Before 1980, cocaine in cinema was generally relegated to fleeting background scenes or portrayed as an elite, innocent pastime (Lev 182). This presentation presented the substance to the audience as a harmless "tonic," detached from the context of social and individual destruction. However, Scarface (1983) radically altered this perception; cocaine now became central to the plot and the direct source of Tony Montana's rise and fall (Lev 185). The substance represented the manic energy that fueled the character's ambition, violence, and conspicuous consumption. Thus, cocaine ceased to be a tool of individual addiction and became a dramatic symbol embodying Montana's capitalist ambition and desire for social power (Markert 125).

According to Markert's analysis, the excessive profits generated through drug trafficking can often be explained by Robert Merton's theory of anomie: individuals develop deviant and innovative strategies when they fail to achieve success through legitimate means (Markert 128). Tony Montana, an immigrant entrepreneur, is a perfect example of the "anomic innovator" who

uses the extraordinary wealth he acquired through cocaine trafficking to achieve an accelerated, hyper-consumptive version of the American Dream (Lev 188). Montana's rise is presented to the audience through his aggressive methods, circumventing the law, and the dramatic consequences of his capitalist desire.

The narrative contrasts sharply with The Godfather's concerns for political protection, family ties, and social stability. Scarface emphasizes the dramatic effects of capitalist materialism and manic behavior by prioritizing speed, glamour, and individual acquisition. The central role of cocaine allows the audience to experience both individual tragedy and the rising economic greed, class divides, and drug crisis in 1980s American society (Lev 190; Markert 130). Furthermore, by positioning cocaine as a factor of social and political crisis, the film not only presents entertainment and drug culture but also provides the audience with a dramatic and educational experience of the drug's effects on individual psychology and social structure. Montana's extreme violence and decline demonstrate to the audience how, unlike the moral panic of heroin narratives, cocaine, through power, speed, and excessive consumption, triggers social and individual destruction (Lev 192; Markert 132).

Scarface (1983) deliberately employs an aesthetic of excess to highlight Tony Montana's wealth through cocaine. The film's opulent mansions, luxury cars, and designer clothes make cocaine not just a drug but a central symbol representing the character's power and seductive lifestyle (Lev 195; Markert 135). This visuality dramatically and concretely presents the viewer with the relationship between substance and wealth. It also clarifies cocaine's role as a social power symbol.



Fig. 4. Still from Scarface. Directed by Brian De Palma. Universal Pictures, 1983.

The film doesn't simply celebrate the rise. Tony Montana's meteoric rise is counterbalanced by an equally dramatic decline in the narrative's moral balance. Public sentiment and cinematic conventions necessitate this decline (Lev 198). The viewer sees how cocaine fuels individual ambition, materialistic desires, and the lust for power. At the same time, the inevitably destructive consequences of these excesses are revealed. Tony Montana's excessive cocaine consumption rapidly escalates the character's paranoia and megalomania (Lev 200). Scenes in which he consumes mountains of powdered cocaine, in particular, deepen his isolation. This process paves the way for the film's violent and suicidal finale. According to Markert, exalted behavior must be punished so that the audience doesn't model negative behavior. The film achieves this by using excessive glamour followed by severe punishment (Markert 138). The audience is both visually captivated and receives the moral warning.

The film's dual strategy, excessive glamour followed by excessive punishment, maintains

commercial appeal. It also clearly demonstrates that cocaine leads to psychotic violence and moral decline (Lev 203). Montana's rise and fall represent individual tragedy. However, it also points to the economic greed, class differences, and drug crisis in 1980s American society (Markert 140). Its release at the height of the Reagan-era crack epidemic and the "War on Drugs" campaigns makes the film even more socially and politically impactful. By associating drugs with violence and chaos, the film strengthens the legitimacy of punitive policies. Furthermore, Scarface does not present cocaine solely as an individual addiction. The substance becomes a symbol of social power, excessive consumption, and manic capitalist greed (Lev 205). Tony Montana's downfall dramatically and instructively demonstrates the devastating effects of drugs on individual psychology, social hierarchy, and economic structure. The trilogy of glamour, violence, and moral decline allows the audience to simultaneously experience the allure and danger of drugs. The film also connects cocaine, on an aesthetic and narrative level, to consumer culture in American society, the immigrant experience, and the "American Dream." As an immigrant, Tony Montana uses his illegally acquired wealth to achieve an accelerated and over-consumed version of the American Dream (Lev 208; Markert 142). In this context, Scarface is not merely a story of individual crime and addiction; Cinematically, Scarface offers a comprehensive analysis of social critique, capitalist materialism, and American culture.

As a result, Scarface combines visuals, character analysis, moral decline, and social context. The film becomes one of the most effective examples of cocaine's dramatic rise in 1980s American cinema. It both teaches the audience a punishing moral lesson and creates a cinematic justification for Reagan-era drug policies. It offers a powerful and comprehensive model for cocaine's narrative association with violence, overconsumption, and chaos (Lev 210; Markert 145).

Scarface has a striking moral resonance. Tony Montana appears as an extremely violent and often immoral character. However, he draws a clear line against heroin. Montana describes heroin as a “dirty drug” and rejects its trade. This choice creates a dramatic contradiction in his character; it gives the audience the impression that some kind of moral hierarchy exists even in a world of extreme corruption. This inadvertently reinforces heroin’s cinematic status as the absolute moral nadir (Markert 150). In the film, within the world of extreme corruption within the cocaine cartels, heroin is still positioned with a distinct negative value. While Tony Montana achieves power, wealth, and conspicuous consumption through cocaine, heroin remains a symbol of ultimate corruption. While the audience is drawn to the allure of cocaine and the epicenter of modern crime, heroin serves as a cinematic moral warning. This dual structure provides a dramatic balance in drug narratives; The viewer is both tempted and aroused (Markert 152). Tony Montana's boundary against heroin establishes a moral hierarchy in the film. Cocaine, as the primary driver of modern crime, takes the dramatic focus. In contrast, heroin cinematically represents absolute negative value. This distinction strengthens the film's treatment of the individual, social, and moral effects of drugs. While cocaine becomes the central element of speed, violence, and materialism, heroin remains the reference point, pushing boundaries and symbolizing absolute corruption (Lev 218; Markert 155).

Furthermore, Scarface dramatizes Montana's extreme behavior to more clearly illustrate heroin's status to the audience. Montana rises and falls through the paranoia and megalomania engendered by cocaine use. The film ensures that heroin remains a throughline in this context. Thus, heroin functions not merely as a drug but as a dramatic and moral boundary. Through Montana's rise and fall, the viewer experiences both the alluring and destructive nature of the drug (Lev 220). The film also reflects American social and cultural anxieties. The rise of cocaine and

the initiation of anti-drug policies prior to the Reagan era strengthen Scarface's cinematic impact. While heroin remains a symbol of absolute corruption, cocaine becomes a central element of modern crime. This distinction presents the audience with a dramatic and moral hierarchy between different types of drugs. The film thus becomes a powerful propaganda tool that legitimizes punitive drug policies and shapes public perception (Markert 158).

Ultimately, Scarface dramatizes modern concepts of crime and morality through the cinematic hierarchy between cocaine and heroin. Montana's demarcation against heroin reinforces heroin's absolute negative value in cinema, while cocaine maintains its allure at the center of modern crime. With this strategy, the film presents the audience with individual tragedy, social corruption, and the moral implications of drugs in a dramatic and educational manner. Cinematically, Scarface provides a comprehensive model for the social and cultural representation of drugs in 1980s American cinema (Lev 222; Markert 160)

Comparative Synthesis and Conclusion

The Dialectic of Vice: Tracing the Cinematic Progression (1969–1983)

From the 70's to 80's, the representation of substance abuse in American cinema underwent a dramatic and ideological transformation. This transformation extends from the period when the counterculture normalized soft drugs and portrayed them as experience-focused, to the period that culminated in the extreme demonization of hard drugs and the legitimization of aggressive government policies (Lev 230). During this period, cinema not only provided audiences with entertainment but also served as a tool that directly engaged with social morality and political concerns (Markert 165).

Marijuana constitutes one of the most striking representations in the early part of this period. In films like Easy Rider (1969), marijuana was presented in the context of individual experience, ritual, or incidental use, and was not directly associated with moral negativity. These representations, normalized by the counterculture, enabled audiences to perceive the substance as a means of freedom and experience. Initially associated with the "gateway" myth, marijuana played an experiential role in cinema. Heroin, on the other hand, represents the opposite of this process. In cinema, it has been consistently demonized and presented as an absolute moral negativity. This has taken on different functions in different narrative contexts. In films like The Godfather (1972), heroin is used to define traditional criminal ethics and provide a moral framework for the characters. Conversely, in police-themed films like French Connection 2 (1975), heroin becomes a tool to legitimize police brutality and state intervention. Detective Popeye's (Gene Hackman) aggressive and illegal tactics are legitimized by the absolute destructiveness of heroin. Thus, heroin functions cinematically as both a moral nadir and an ideological catalyst (Lev 234; Markert 170).

The representation of cocaine, however, has undergone a dramatic evolution throughout

the period. In Easy Rider in the late 1960s, cocaine functions as a catalytic element that enables freedom. However, in the early 1980s, with Scarface (1983), cocaine became a highly destructive element, central to the plot and triggering character collapse (Lev 238; Markert 175). This evolution demonstrates the transformation of cocaine from a simple MacGuffin in cinema to a moral and dramatic determinant. In the film, cocaine is presented to the audience as the central element of speed, violence, and materialism. The cinematic function of hard drugs underwent a rapid ideological shift during this period. Initially purely catalytic substances (cocaine enables freedom in Easy Rider), they became increasingly morally defining (heroin represents moral purity in crime in The Godfather), and ultimately became a tool for legitimizing state violence and punitive policies (heroin legitimizes Popeye's extreme tactics in French Connection 2) (Lev 240; Markert 178). This shift reveals the powerful impact of films in creating a moral climate and influencing audiences to respond to it. At the same time, the cinema of this period dramatically presents the individual, social, and political implications of drug use. The audience experiences a wide range of experiences, from scenes where marijuana is associated with freedom and experience to scenes where heroin is treated as a symbol of absolute corruption. The dramatic rise of cocaine, in turn, highlights the moral decline of the characters and the economic and psychological dimensions of crime in modern society (Lev 242; Markert 180). Thus, American cinema between 1969 and 1983 visualizes a moral, dramatic, and ideological dialectic through drug representations.

The films of this period also present the audience with a hierarchy among drugs. Marijuana is perceived as a symbol of freedom. Heroin is positioned as an absolute moral evil. Cocaine, on the other hand, becomes a dramatic centerpiece, representing both allure and destructiveness. This tripartite structure reveals not only the individual but also the social and political consequences of drug use in cinema (Lev 244; Markert 182). Consequently, American cinema between 1969 and

1983 exhibits a significant evolution in the ideological and moral representations of substance abuse. From the experiential and liberating role of marijuana to the absolute negativity of heroin and the dramatic function of cocaine, the process offers a dramatic and visualized history of individual tragedy, social corruption, and state intervention in cinema. This period has left a lasting impact on the way both filmmakers and audiences perceive the relationships between drugs, morality, and social order (Lev 246; Markert 185).

The era spanning the late 1960s through the 1980s in North American cinema represents a seismic shift in how the medium engaged with illicit substances and the social structures surrounding them. Moving away from the rigid moralism of the Production Code era, which largely prohibited the explicit depiction of drug consumption unless accompanied by immediate and catastrophic retribution, this period birthed a new, more ambiguous, and visually aggressive form of storytelling. Cinema during these two decades did not simply mirror the public's reaction to drugs; it acted as a primary mechanism of social construction, framing public policy through narrative "scripts" that defined who used drugs, why they used them, and what kind of state intervention was justified. By analyzing the canonical works of this era, *Easy Rider* (1969), *The French Connection* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972), *French Connection II* (1975), and *Scarface* (1983), this thesis has traced the evolution of the drug from a symbol of countercultural freedom to a diagnostic tool for social pathology and, ultimately, to a hyper-capitalist symbol. This final synthesis explores how these films negotiated the boundary between myth and reality, shaping a public consciousness that remains influenced by these cinematic archetypes.

The foundation of drug depiction in the 1970s was laid during the industrial instability of the late 1960s. As the Hollywood studio system collapsed, fragmented audiences, dominated by young adults, rejected the predictable genre conventions of the past. Studio executives began taking

chances on younger talent connected to the radical social challenges of the hippie movement. This allowed for the emergence of *Easy Rider* (1969), which is frequently cited as the touchstone for the American counterculture. However, a nuanced academic analysis reveals that the film is as much a critique of ruthless entrepreneurialism as it is a celebration of freedom. The quest for existential liberation undertaken by Wyatt and Billy is funded by a cocaine deal; a "sin" that judicially and thematically judges the characters. By smuggling high-purity cocaine from Mexico and selling it to a "Connection" for a massive profit, the protagonists engage in the very exploitation they seek to transcend. The dollar bills they receive are stuffed into a plastic tube stashed inside a star-spangled fuel tank, a semiotic fusion of the American flag and the narcotics trade that suggests the rebellion of the 1960s was an inadvertent product of the capitalist system.

As Wyatt and Billy travel from West to East, the film documents the failure of the communal ideal, culminating in Wyatt's admits that they "blew it". The LSD trip in the New Orleans cemetery serves as the final breakdown of innocence, transforming the "mind-expanding" promise of the 1960s into a hazy, interminable terror of psychodrama. Public perception was shifted by this ending: it suggested that the "establishment" was an antiquated hierarchy that would inevitably extinguish the "angels" of the road. *Easy Rider* establishes the road movie as a genre of alienation, where drug use highlights the disillusionment of a generation that realized its dreams were "false start" ideals. If *Easy Rider* explored the internal failures of the counterculture, *The Godfather* (1972) utilized heroin as the primary vehicle to explore the dark side of the American Dream. The narrative is set in motion by Don Vito Corleone's refusal to enter the narcotics trade, a decision rooted in an "Old World" feudal ethical system where power is maintained through personal patronage rather than impersonal capitalist contracts. Vito argues that heroin is a "dirty business" that would destroy his political alliances. By distinguishing "legitimate" crime; like

gambling, from the "indiscriminately destructive" nature of drugs, the film humanizes the gangster as a "victim-hero" who suffers because he attempts to draw a line at drugs. This shifted public perception of the Mafia from common murderers to a parallel house of justice. However, the transition of power to Michael Corleone serves as a tragic meditation on the corruption of identity. Michael's transformation into a ruthless mob boss mirrors the Nixonian mentality of the 1970s, a period characterized by broken trust and the obsession with destroying enemies. When Michael eventually integrates drugs into the empire, he fulfills the "nightmare" of the American Dream achieved through cleverness and force rather than hard work.

The 1970s also saw the heroin trade reframed from a criminal issue to a "public enemy number one" crisis, largely due to President Nixon's declaration of a national "War on Drugs" in 1971. *The French Connection* (1971) adopted a gritty, quasi-documentary style that presented Detective "Popeye" Doyle as the "hound on the loose" who feeds off the seamy underbelly of the city. The film popularized the term "The French Connection," identifying Marseille as a centralized hub for heroin manufacture. This narrative conferred a degree of unity on a network that historical archives reveal was actually protean and in a state of permanent reconfiguration. While the movie depicts a structured market with "barons" at the top, the reality of the trade shifted toward dispersed networks of small-time "user-pushers" who were far more difficult to quash.

The portrayal of Doyle as a "bad news but good cop" figure was instrumental in shifting public tolerance toward the erosion of basic rights in the name of interdiction. Doyle's racist views and his inclination to beat suspects were presented as "evils necessary" to combat traffickers who were flooding New York with "Grade A poison". This shifted perception from drug use as a "lifestyle choice" to a security threat that justified militarized policing. The cynical ending, where Doyle fires into the shadows of a decaying factory, mirrored a national mood of internal defeat and

the realization that the drug war would be an endless struggle.

The 1975 sequel, *French Connection II*, marked a significant evolution in the depiction of the addict. While the first film focused on the pursuit of the drug, the second film focuses on the drug's physical conquest of the hero. Popeye Doyle is kidnapped and "forcibly hooked" on heroin, stripping him of his dignity and reducing him to a "broken, powerless" figure. The film devotes a lengthy central sequence to Doyle's agonizing "cold-turkey" withdrawal. This sequence functioned as a harrowing educational tool for the 1970s public, assuming that heroin was "powerfully addictive regardless of the users' will". Director John Frankenheimer utilized this extreme suffering to effect a change in his protagonist's personality; the demoralization of addiction is followed by a single-minded renewal of purpose. This sequence also emphasized the "culture of addicts and thieves" bred by the trade, exemplified by the elderly lady who visits the addicted Doyle only to steal his watch. By focusing on the "dialectal torture" of recovery, mid-1970s cinema began framing addiction as a descent into powerlessness that required brutal methods to overcome.

By the release of *Scarface* in 1983, the North American landscape of drug consumption had shifted dramatically from the "underclass" heroin trade to the glamorization of cocaine. Tony Montana represents the "perverse alter ego of the ambitious, profit-minded American male". Arriving via the Mariel boatlift in 1980, Montana's call to adventure is driven by a desire to conquer what he believes he is owed through individual violence. *Scarface* acts as an allegory for late capitalism itself. Tony's trajectory implies that under capitalism, "getting high on your own supply" is inevitable, as the system is based on the exploitation of universal human dissatisfaction. Cocaine becomes the preferred modality of capitalist subjectivity: "radical and inviolate individuality". Prof. Joseph Patteson describes Western addiction to cocaine as a "parody of capitalism", it shores up a solipsistic sense of self closed off to identification with others and

oriented toward consumption.

The film's hyperbolic display of violence and hedonism, soundtracked by synthetic strings reminiscent of a 1970s nightclub, was jarring to audiences. While intellectuals like Kurt Vonnegut walked out of the theater, the film became a cult classic for youth who appropriated Tony Montana as an icon of "gangster heroism". Tony's confrontation with the "WASP establishment" in an exclusive restaurant, screaming "You're not good, you just know how to hide", argued that there is no difference between "legal" capitalism and the drug trade. By the mid-1980s, cinema had shifted from the road of self-discovery to a "throne of sand" built on tons of narcotics, reflecting the spirit of excess and inequality of the Reagan era.

A holistic examination reveals how North American cinema employed specific narrative mechanisms to shape public attitudes. Paul Iannicelli identifies a consistent pattern of using drugs as tools to amplify broader societal fears. First is the theme of Racism and Xenophobia ("Blame the Other"). Movies consistently linked drug use to minority groups or foreign influences. *The French Connection* films framed heroin as a Marseille-based invasion , while *Scarface* perpetuated "drug-riddled Latinx stereotypes" such as the hot-tempered kingpin. This made it easier to win support for measures like the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which established a 100:1 sentencing disparity between crack (associated with Black inner-city communities) and powdered cocaine (used by affluent white Americans).

Second is the Urban/Rural Dichotomy, where cinema utilized a nostalgia for an "agrarian past" to contrast the perceived purity of rural life with the drug-infested city. *Easy Rider* sought transcendence in the wilderness but found the "wilderness" inhabited by the very intolerance that fueled the city's decay. By the 1980s, the "seamy underbelly" seen in the "grubby downtown

Brooklyn" of *The French Connection* or the "orgy of blood" in Miami reinforced the perception that the modern city was a den of vice requiring militarized policing. Third is The Road to Ruin, an uncontrollably downward spiral applied to characters who engaged with narcotics. Even when characters were humanized, as in the Corleone family, drug involvement led to the destruction of the family unit. The "visual saliency" of films like *French Connection II*, specifically the graphic portrayal of Doyle's cold-turkey agony, pounded home the message that any drug use would wreck an individual's life.

Fourth, drugs were intertwined with Dangerous Sexuality as a marker of social breakdown. From the LSD-fueled "orgy" in the cemetery in *Easy Rider* to Doyle's interest in "kinky sex" and the incestuous paranoia Tony Montana feels for his sister Gina, cinema used the "fear of the transgressor" to reinforce traditionalist morality. Fifth is the depiction of the "Wild" Younger Generation. Drug use was consistently used as an indication of a threatening youth population. *Easy Rider* began this by portraying youth "searching for identity" through substances, but by the mid-1970s, the emergence of the "user-pusher" suggested the countercultural experiment had devolved into a fragmented criminal market. This narrative justified the shift toward the "Just Say No" era, which treated youth in trouble as people who made trouble.

The profound impact of these films is due to their "visual saliency". Commanding undistracted attention, graphic depictions stay in the "mind's eye" long after the context fades, leading to a situation where "fiction becomes reality". For example, although only 25% of modern addicts inject drugs, the "needle in the arm" remains a constant cinematic leitmotif. The time-based imagery, the spoon heating, the slap of the arm, the orgasmic rush, forces the spectator to "feel" what addiction is in a way that provides direct access to the subjective experience. This reinforces the social stereotype of the addict as a "monster without moral principles," even when war veterans

like Doyle are used as sympathetic conduits.

Furthermore, cinema served as an "instructional utility". Those who have never used cocaine "know" how to roll a paper bill to do a "line" because of scenes in films like *Annie Hall* (1977) or the spectacularized consumption in *Scarface*. This modeling behavior often creates a "positive aura" surrounding the drug's initial "high," which can increase public tolerance even as it demonizes the "pusher". The "last golden period of cinema", the late 1970s, was characterized by a "clamor of competing voices" that engaged with the sexual revolution through the lens of drug use. However, the rise of the blockbuster and the stabilization of the industry in the 1980s led to a return to simple genre films and punitive messaging.

The War on Drugs was fought on both political and cultural fronts, with movies like *Scarface* serving as "weaponry". While popular culture boiled the issue down to "personal righteousness," legal policy used "brute force". This proved remarkably effective in strengthening a national identity defined against "cognitive enemies" like the foreign narco-trafficker. The evidence suggests that North American cinema from 1969 to 1983 acted as a "safety valve" for ideological contradictions centered on race and the family. By portraying the "hero's journey" through pharmacological excess and violent retribution, films like *Easy Rider* and *Scarface* enabled the audience to engage with fantasies of power while simultaneously affirming the status quo's eventual triumph.

Ultimately, North American cinema did not merely reflect public perception; it was the "automatic handwriting of the counterculture" and the "weaponized media" of the establishment. It transformed the "protean" reality of the drug trade into a collection of distorted visual myths that continue to frame public discourse. The "price of freedom" and the "price of power" were

repeatedly paid on screen, cementing a legacy where the "demon dope" remains the primary antagonist in the American pursuit of its dream.

Markert's Legacy: Film, Policy, and the Perpetuation of Drug Myths

From 1969 to 1983, drug representations in American cinema underwent a dramatic ideological evolution. This evolution extends from the period when the counterculture presented soft drugs within an experiential and liberating framework to the period when hard drugs were demonized and legitimized state intervention (Lev 250; Markert 190). Cinema not only offered the audience an aesthetic and dramatic experience but also became a powerful tool for redefining social, political, and moral values. Easy Rider (1969) is one of the earliest examples of this process. The film uses marijuana and other soft drugs within the context of individual freedom, experience, and ritual. The audience sees the drug as a symbol of freedom and gains a perspective that challenges the moral authority of institutions (Lev 250). During this period, the audience is shown a positive, cultural, and individual aspect of the drug experience; marijuana is presented as a symbolic element of freedom, presenting it as a limited danger.

However, later films establish a moral framework through the representation of heroin and other hard drugs. In films like The Godfather (1972), heroin is used as a tool to emphasize traditional criminal ethics. Through the characters, the audience is conveyed the drug's destructive effects and moral consequences (Lev 252). French Connection 2 (1975), by contrast, positioned heroin as absolute evil, serving to legitimize federal police intervention and punitive state policies. Detective Popeye's (Gene Hackman) aggressive and illegal tactics were legitimized by heroin's destructiveness, presenting the audience with the ideological justifications for "police vigilantism" (Lev 252; Markert 192).

French Connection 2 particularly highlights the tension between historical accuracy and narrative effectiveness. Alexandre Marchant notes that the French Connection was, in reality, quite complex and multipolar (Markert 195). However, the film reduces this complex reality to the myth of a unified and powerful enemy. This simplification provided the audience with a clearer and more satisfying target, accelerated Franco-American cooperation, and strengthened the ideological basis for punitive policies (Lev 254). The film presented heroin as an absolute moral evil while dramatically justifying the state's aggressive intervention.

Scarface (1983), however, completed the cinematic cycle in a different way. The film created a new and frightening myth for cocaine. Heroin was no longer a silent symbol of moral decline, but was positioned, through cocaine, at the center of manic violence and excessive consumption (Lev 256; Markert 198). Tony Montana's rise and fall demonstrate to the audience the fleeting allure of wealth, power, and conspicuous consumption, while dramatically presenting the inevitable destruction that follows. Aesthetically, the film uses excessive glamour followed by excessive and punishing destruction to prevent the perception of glamorous lifestyles as a positive model.

The relationship between cinematic spectacle and political reaction became clearly evident during this period. The most graphic and sensational drug scenes mobilized public fear. This fear provided the necessary scenarios for the implementation of increasingly strict and militarized anti-drug policies (Lev 258; Markert 200). Films not only offered an aesthetic experience but also dramatically demonstrated the social, individual, and moral consequences of drug use. Thus, cinema became a tool that both legitimized punitive state policies and shaped public perception.

Moreover, films during this period presented a hierarchy of drug use. Marijuana was associated with freedom and experience, heroin was positioned as the absolute evil, and cocaine was presented

to the audience as the dramatic centerpiece. This tripartite structure dramatically emphasized not only the individual but also the social and political consequences of drug use in cinema (Lev 260; Markert 203). Consequently, American cinema between 1969 and 1983 clearly demonstrated the ideological, dramatic, and moral implications of drug representations. The progression from Easy Rider to Scarface demonstrates how the function of hard drugs in cinema has evolved, conveying powerful messages to audiences across individual, social, and political contexts. These films challenged the audience to dramatically experience the allure and danger of drugs, making cinema both a demonstrator and promoter of a moral dialectic.

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