

# Media constructions of illegal drugs, users, and sellers: a closer look at *Traffic*

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## Abstract

This essay examines how the entertainment media constructs illegal drugs, users, and sellers. As well, it explores how television and movie producers are awarded for depicting ‘correct’ images of illegal drugs, users and sellers. The second half of the paper discusses the British made for television mini-series ‘Traffik’, and the later U.S. production ‘Traffic’. Six ‘war on drugs’ myths depicted in the U.S. film ‘Traffic’ are examined with a focus on race, class, and gender issues.

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## Introduction

Since the mid-1800, media representations of drug users and traffickers in the US have centred on what is perceived as the ‘dangerous classes’ and racial minorities as the ‘Other.’ Drug traffickers are constructed as ‘outsiders’ that threaten the world order of white, middle-class protestant morality. They are depicted as dangerous, out of control, and a threat to the nation, the family and white women’s morality. Thus, the ideological framework for future drug legislation and media depictions of drug users and traffickers was realised early on. The white public viewed early drug legislation as a justifiable tool to regulate identified racialised populations. Today’s war on drugs is characterised by the ‘routinisation of caricature’ which promotes worst case scenarios as the norm, sensationalises, and distorts drug issues in the media (Reinarman & Duskin, 1999). Media representations of illegal drugs are often moralistic, and fuelled by race, class, and gender concerns. Illegal drugs are presented as so dangerous (without providing any pharmacological evidence), that criminal justice control is considered ‘noble’ (Beyerstein & Hadaway, 1990).

This article looks at how the entertainment media depicts illegal drugs, drug users, and sellers. The first section of the essay examines the construction of drug use and trafficking in US films and TV. The second section looks at how the US government awards magazines, and television and movie producers, for faithfully maintaining and perpetuating drug war rhetoric. The third section examines the British made for television mini-series *Traffik* 1989 and the later US production *Traffic* 2000. In conclusion, six war on drugs myths depicted in the American film *Traffic* are explored by describing a snapshot from the film, and exploring inaccuracies and stereotypes, with a specific focus on race, class, and gender issues.

Rather than film theory, this paper draws on cultural criminology, which emerges out of ‘critical traditions in sociology, criminology, and cultural studies’ (Ferrell & Websdale, 1999, p. 3). Cultural criminology is ‘a mode of analysis that embodies sensitivities to image, meaning, and representation in the study of deviance, crime, and control’ in films and popular culture (Ferrell & Websdale, 1999, p. 3). For the purpose of this paper, I am referring to realist films that ‘focus primarily’ on illegal drugs, trafficking, and their consequences. These films present ideas about pleasure, justice, the nature of addiction, morality, criminality, the drug user and trafficker, and the effectiveness of the police, criminal

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justice, treatment and punishment. Such films as *Midnight Express* 1978, *Drugstore Cowboy* 1989, *Trainspotting* 1996, *Traffik* 1989, and *Traffic* 2000, *Blow* 2001, fall into this category. Thus comedies such as Cheech and Chong's *Up In Smoke* 1978, and documentaries such as *Grass* 2000 are excluded from the category because they are not based on fictive realism.

Movies both reflect and shape popular culture; still, movie viewers are not passive receptors, rather people 'negotiate their experiences according to their own histories' (Boyd, 2002: 46). As well, media representations are not static, nor are the ideologies embedded in them. Ideology is significant in that it often succeeds in maintaining and upholding the world as it is structured as fair, acceptable, and natural, when it is basically unfair and corrupt (Cohen, 1985). Myth can be viewed as a descriptive term referring to assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that constitute ideology (Rafter, 2000). Myths appear natural and unproblematic, and they are evident in both the narrative and imagery of *Traffik* and *Traffic*. The ideologies and myths that we hold shape our world and may limit our imagination, making 'other ways of interpreting the world unthinkable' (Pfohl, 1994: 416). In addition, what is left unsaid in film is just as important as the myths portrayed in them (Rafter, 2000).

### The construction of drug use and trafficking in films and TV

Today, knowledge is often transmitted through pictures rather than the written word (Mathiesen, 2000). The emergence of film in the 1900s allowed for a much wider public audience, especially given that literacy was not a requirement for gaining access to information. Surette (1992) claims that movies are the first 'modern mass medium' which has produced a mass culture that crosses ethnic, class and cultural (p. 25), as well as gender and race lines. Although the emergence of TV in the late 1940s succeeded in capturing a larger viewer audience, movies continue to be popular and accessible in theatres, at home on TV, and through video releases. Cultural criminologists state that "in the process of constructing crime and crime control as social and political concerns, the media constructs them as entertaining" (Ferrell & Websdale, 1999, p. 11).

In TV and cinema, drug use and selling, is a central theme. Media portrayals of crime, and drug use and selling, are more violent, and numerous, than in real life. Greed, rather than poverty, is the most popular motivation for drug selling, with young, white women as the favourite crime victim (Surette, 1992). Equally popular are supercops who take the law into their own hands (Surette, 1992). The entertainment industry has consistently, with few exceptions, celebrated the cop,

who succeeds against all odds, and gets his man or women. Today, media depictions of police brutality against drug users and seller are the norm.

Movies are one public source of information about crime, drugs, and the criminal justice system. Crime films not only 'mold our thoughts about the fundamental social, economic, and political issues of the day,' they 'define the crime problem' (Rafter, 2000: 62, 179). Some films are obvious propaganda pieces that depict the evils of drugs. The film *Reefer Madness* 1936 was an attempt by Harry Anslinger and the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics to 'inform' by frightening the public about the horrors of marijuana use. The film vividly showed the horrors associated with marijuana use: where one toke of a marijuana cigarette led to addiction, violent crime and insanity. Today most audiences laugh when they view *Reefer Madness*, however, when it was produced it was viewed as an appropriate and serious vehicle for addressing marijuana use. Other films have not been so blatant in their anti-drug message although, most films and TV programs about drugs, users, and sellers, look to the criminal justice system, and lone renegade police and (DEA) officers for solutions. As well, they tend to blame the individual, and highlight individualistic psychologically based solutions to drug issues, rather than examining social, political, and legal factors that shape drug use. The drug user is usually portrayed as a person of colour who is driven by their addiction, out of control, and willing to do 'anything' in order to obtain drugs.

The media's most hateful depictions are reserved for the drug dealer/trafficker. Both the drug dealer and user are depicted as 'deranged or depraved' (Alexander, 1990: 33). However, with few exceptions, drug traffickers are also viewed as evil, sadistic, immoral, greedy corrupt outsiders, who lure innocent youth, and draw moral women into drug addiction and crime. The media constructs them as guilty in the eyes of law enforcement and society, and therefore, deserving of the brutal treatment handed out to them by criminal justice vigilantes, family members of the victim, and justice seeking police officers. Drug sellers are routinely shot, and killed, in movies and TV shows before they can be arrested, or brought to court. In Hollywood, the drug trafficker is most often portrayed as a black or Hispanic man living in the inner-city in the US, and the 'king pin' who has even higher status, thus more evil intentions, is usually represented as a Hispanic man from Mexico, or South America.

### Censorship and the entertainment industry

The strange convergence of government, print media, and film is not necessarily new. The US government has always been in the business of censoring print, TV, and

movies. In 2000 it was revealed that the US government had spent over \$1 billion dollars in a 5-year propaganda effort to convince US citizens that its ‘tough war-on-drugs policy’ is desirable. A portion of the money paid for anti-drug articles to be inserted in US and Canadian magazines (Saunders, 2000). US television networks that write scripts with anti-drug messages are also rewarded with government advertising deals for accurately portraying drug issues.

Since 1997, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), in partnership with the Entertainment Industries Council (EIC), present the PRISM award each year to producers for accurately portraying drug issues in their programs. They state that they are trying to educate and encourage Hollywood to be more responsible in its portrayal of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use (Vittala, 2000). In fact, if movie and TV script writers wish to assure that their scripts will meet approval with the US government, they can refer to *Spotlight on depiction of health and social issues*, published by the Entertainment Industries Council, in collaboration with the National Institute on Drug Abuse and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and sent to TV and filmmakers in the US (EIC, NIDA, & TRWJF, 2000). The authors state that, “The entertainment industry can make an enormous contribution in changing public perceptions about substance abuse and addiction. Its products reach and influence millions, and incidents and themes of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drug use, abuse, and addiction are already commonly found in storylines” (EIC, 2000: vii). Similarly, they note that ‘accurate depictions of drug abuse and addiction in entertainment productions can strongly counter public misperceptions’ (EIC, 2000: viii). The authors of *Spotlight* claim that they draw solely from scientific understanding of drug abuse and addiction. Although tobacco and alcohol are discussed in *Spotlight*, there is no mention of the marketing of these products in television and film.

The Entertainment Industries Council offers full service from ‘script-to-screen’ guidance. Their depiction selections for cocaine include inserting ‘occasional lines of dialogue with people reacting negatively to someone’s cocaine use and other illegal drugs in order ‘to cast a shadow’ on use, and they instruct screenwriters to show that illegal drug use is very addictive (EIC, 2000: 12.1). Interestingly, there are no sociological, harm reduction, or drug user’s perspectives on drug use in *Spotlight*. Rather, the publication describes drug abuse and addiction as a biological, progressive, and permanent disease; thus total abstinence is required. The authors state that drug addiction is a ‘...compulsion. Drug addicts have... lost their free will to decide whether or not to use drugs’ (EIC, 2000: 1.1,10.3). They claim that ‘addicts find that only drugs can give them pleasure’ (EIC, 2000: 10.3). The disease model of

addiction portrays drugs as dangerous, and the drug user as immoral, pathological, and out of control. The authors of *Spotlight* claim that their views on drugs are based on scientific data; however, there is no scientific evidence to support biological or genetic explanations of addiction (Peele & Brodsky, 1991).

*Spotlight* does not include a discussion of the criminal law or the criminal justice system. This is revealing since most of the drugs they examine are illegal in the US. Drug war ideology and the disease model of addiction incorporate the belief that illegal drug use impairs morality. Thus, drug laws are viewed as justifiable.

### Traffic and Traffik

Keeping in mind that ‘there is no escape from the politics of representation’ (Hall, 1993, p. 111), our attention will turn to drug movies, specifically the recent movies *Traffik* 1989 and *Traffic* 2000. *Traffik* was directed by Stephen Soderbergh, and went on to be nominated for several academy awards, and came home with four of them in 2001. It was also the New York Film Critics choice for best film of the year, and received five Golden Globe Awards. Some politicians, and the US media have generally praised it for its accurate depiction of the war on drugs, in fact, a few politicians actually participated in the movie (Cowan & Wren, 2001; Muwakkil, 2001).

The American produced film *Traffic*, is roughly based on the earlier 1989 British mini-series *Traffik*, a three part television series that was produced and first shown on Channel 4 Television. The script was written by Simon Moore and portrays the war on drugs from three different vantagepoints. *Traffik* also won a number of awards including the International Emmy and Broadcasting Press Guilds Awards. Because most US viewers have not seen the British mini-series *Traffik* (in contrast to the US film *Traffic*) I will describe part of it in some detail. In the British mini-series *Traffik*, the viewer is introduced to Fazal, a poor rural poppy grower in Pakistan, and his family; the UK’s Member of Parliament who is newly appointed to head the Drug Abuse Committee, and his wife, and daughter who is addicted to heroin; and a German drug dealer and his British wife and children. The story is very complex juxtapositioning the plight of Fazal, and rural poppy growers limited choices in the face of a crop eradication program supported by the UK that destroys their livelihood. It is shown that government representatives from Pakistan are pressured by the UK to carry out crop eradication programs in order to continue to receive aid. As well, the viewer comes to understand that poor rural farmers have few acres and depleted soil to farm; thus poppies are grown because it is easier and more profitable to grow than sugar cane or other trade items. Growing

poppies and smoking opium is depicted as different than heroin use. The ‘heroin’ problem is depicted as a western construct, most specifically a British and American problem. The US is depicted as fuelling drug trafficking in Pakistan through its demand and consumption of illegal drugs at home, and the CIA and DEA’s involvement in financing ‘freedom fighters’ linked to the drug trade and arms trading.

In order to survive when Pakistani soldiers burn his poppy fields, Fazal goes to Karachi to find work. Similar to his fellow countryman who move to the city, he is unable to find employment. He eventually finds employment with a ruthless Karachi trafficker named Tariq who converts opium to heroin and sells it to western dealers. Fazal is eventually arrested for transporting drugs and is imprisoned. His wife agrees to transport heroin into the UK, on the condition that Tariq will help her husband. However, she dies right after arriving at the airport in the UK; poisoned by the heroin she has ingested. Her husband is eventually released from prison, and he avenges her death by injecting heroin into Tariq’s neck.

*Traffik* refers to the history of the Afghanistan war against the Soviet Union. During this period, the US funded CIA covert operations that supported and protected drug traffickers in Pakistan and Afghanistan (McCoy, 1991). Backed by US funding the Pakistan border was opened to accommodate the CIA, and millions of Afghan refugees during the war. From 1979 to 1989 the Pakistan military controlled \$2 billion in CIA covert aid, and arms, which they distributed to Afghan guerrillas during the war. The aid also supported training camps for Afghan guerrillas run by the Pakistan military (McCoy, 1991: 451). It was here that many Afghan men first came into contact with Taliban fundamentalist Islamic beliefs. After 10 years of war against the Soviets, and CIA covert funds, Afghanistan guerrillas and the Pakistan military emerged as proficient drug traffickers.

In the 1970s heroin use was not a significant problem in Pakistan; however by the 1980s that would change, as more people became addicted. McCoy (1991) notes that the heroin trade flourished during the war even though 17 DEA agents were stationed at the US embassy in Islamabad, and during that time there was never one major drug arrest. In fact, ‘heroin was shipped out in the same Pakistani army trucks that brought in covert US aid to the Afghan guerrillas’ (Scott & Marshall, 1998: 187). The US ignored the drug trade and the rise of the Taliban as it served their own political purposes to limit Soviet expansion at the time. Once the Soviets were expelled from Afghanistan, and civil war broke out, the US refused to help.

The mini-series *Traffik* ends on an interesting note. Due to his daughter’s drug addiction, and his own personal and professional transformation (he actually

tries smoking opium while in Pakistan) during the movie, the British drug czar is depicted stating, “we can’t limit supply; we can only limit the demand for it. Long terms this means. . .producing a decent society that people want to live in, and not to escape from.” The potential of this speech is slightly lost when the script-writer follows up this statement with the need for continued support for criminal justice efforts. Nevertheless, the czar concludes, “we can’t police the world.”

There are several key differences between the US movie *Traffic* and the British mini-series *Traffik*. In the US movie, cocaine is the illegal drug being used, and sold, rather than heroin. The US version does not include the story of the rural farmer and family, rather the three stories intertwined in the US film include: a Latino American drug dealer named Carlos, his pregnant wife and child; the DEA, specifically two male agents, one black, and one Hispanic, and the Mexican police, focusing on an honest cop, and a corrupt general; and the newly appointed drug czar, his wife, and daughter Carolyn, who is depicted as descending into crack addiction. Mexico is represented as the cocaine supplier for the US, rather than Pakistan and the opium (heroin) supplier.

Even though many have lauded the US film *Traffic* as a breakthrough and a radical departure from the war on drugs stance, the following discussion will explore the many faulty myths about drugs, drug use, and selling, represented in the US film *Traffic*. For embedded in *Traffic*, as in any film about crime and justice, are ‘ideological messages. . .about the nature of reality’ (Rafter, 2000: 7).

### **Myth 1: there are observable differences in people who use illegal drugs and addiction is a disease**

The US czar’s young daughter is introduced as an innocent, white, blue eyed, blond, high school student in private school uniform, the media’s favourite type of victim. She is physically transformed after smoking crack, she leans against the wall sweating, eyes rolling, disorientated, as the drug czar, her father, searches her room for drug paraphernalia. Finding evidence of her crack use, he sends her to a residential drug treatment centre. At the treatment centre, a man speaks about his ‘powerlessness over alcohol, my disease says I don’t have a disease. It’s a disease, allergy of the body and obsession of the mind.’ At the end of the movie, the viewer witnesses the drug czar, his wife, and daughter Carolyn, at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting where she admits that she is an ‘addict.’

One’s physical appearance does not radically change after inhaling crack, and as discussed earlier, there is no substantial evidence to support a biological disease mechanism that accounts for addiction. In contrast to

the disease model of addiction and conventional research on drugs, critics state that people have a wide range of experiences with drugs, from positive to negative. Most people use drugs recreationally, and are able to maintain positive relationship without the fear of escalating or negative use (O'Hare, 1982). It is not the drug itself, but our relationships with specific drugs that shape patterns of use.

Harm reduction, which focuses on minimising harm that drugs can cause the user and society, supports 'controlled' drug use education and other user friendly pragmatic programs such as needle exchange and maintenance programs. These unmoralistic pragmatic interventions are not explored in *Traffic*, nor is the fact that conventional treatment can be quite punitive. Neither are drug users and drug users unions, who view themselves differently from Carolyn and her drug treatment cohorts, represented in the film. The social, political, and economic factors that shape drug use, and fuel the war on drugs, are ignored and the hegemonic view that 'addiction' is an individual pathology, a disease that requires abstinence, is maintained in the film.

### **Myth 2: crack is instantly addicting and leads to a deviant lifestyle**

In contrast to the images in the film *Traffic*, crack is not instantly addicting, nor does it lead to a deviant or dangerous lifestyle; rather people have a wide range of responses to crack, and powder cocaine, and there is no uniform progression of use. The majority of cocaine users are successful in maintaining unproblematic and controlled use (Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991). Cocaine can be toxic when used in large quantities, and can even present harms when used in small quantities, but overall most users will not experience any serious harm related to their cocaine use nor participate in other criminal activities (Morgan & Zimmer, 1997). Cocaine related deaths have been misrepresented in the media (Wong & Alexander, 1991). Contrary to media reports about cocaine addiction, cocaine is not physically addictive, though a small minority of people have been psychologically addicted to the drug (Morgan & Zimmer, 1997).

Only a small minority of people use crack in the US. Nevertheless, in the film *Traffic* Carolyn is depicted speaking to her drug treatment group saying, "it is easier to get drugs than alcohol" for her age group. In fact, US youths are overwhelmingly involved with alcohol use rather than cocaine use. When high school seniors are asked which drugs they consumed in the last month, 51% state alcohol and 2.5% state cocaine, and college students give similar replies. Marijuana is the illegal drug of choice for youths; nevertheless, its use

pales next to alcohol consumption (23.1 and 51%, respectively) (United States Department of Justice, 2000: 1).

### **Myth 3: crack use equals hyper-sexuality in women**

In the film Carolyn's school friend Seth introduces her to cocaine. After she free-bases cocaine with him, a tear rolls down her cheek and she welcomes his sexual advances. Later he takes her to a black inner-city neighbourhood where he rents a room in a seedy looking hotel. While lying in bed fully clothed they smoke crack together. He says to her "I want to have sex, do a hit as were both coming." She replies softly, "ok."

Some academics, the press, and the entertainment industry have sensationalised hyper-sexuality and exchanges of sex for crack. Crack is not the first drug, nor the first commodity that women have exchanged sex for. Although women are most vulnerable to poverty and male violence and have historically exchanged sex for commodities in patriarchal societies where unequal gender inequality prevails, men also exchange sex for drugs, but we hear little about this phenomenon.

In contrast to the myth of the crack-whore and female hyper-sexuality, Macdonald, Waldorf, Reinerman and Murphy (1988) study of 228 heavy users of cocaine in the US demonstrated the diversity of sexual responses to cocaine use. Men reported more sexual enhancement from cocaine than women did. However, they reported the heavier the cocaine use, the more negative the impacts on one's sex life. Rosenbaum, Murphy, Irwin and Watson (1990) also found that crack use lowers sexual desire in women. In fact, most people become sexually dysfunctional when they use cocaine heavily. Bourgois (1995) states that the myth of the aphrodisiacal powers of crack is maintained and perpetuated by 'journalists, social scientists, dealers, and addicts themselves' (p. 280). The participants in Rosenbaum et al. (1990) study claimed that male researchers have tended to exaggerate the importance of sex in their studies.

### **Myth 4: black men lure white girls into addiction and sexual corruption**

The film *Traffic* chronicles Carolyn's descent into crack addiction and her flight to the black inner-city. The film includes a voyeuristic scene of a black man having sex as the camera quickly focuses in on Carolyn's body underneath his. The movie viewer is presented with a clear picture of his naked body (no one else in the film is shown naked) as he walks away to conduct a drug transaction. When the black man returns to the bedroom he finds Carolyn going through the satchel of

drugs and hypodermic needles. He asks her, “Want to do that”? In the next scene he is shown injecting cocaine into a vein in her foot. Afterwards, she lies back in the bed, and he leans over and resumes having sex with her.

The message in *Traffic* is very clear. In class based, sexist, white supremacist America, a white girl’s downfall and degradation is constructed as addiction and sexual corruption at the hands of a black man. Similar to earlier racist stereotypes constructed by the media, white girls are depicted as both passive and vulnerable. The myth of the black rapist served to legitimise lynching black males after slavery ended in the US, and the criminal image of the black male ‘is continuously evoked today to perpetuate the dominant societies continued fear and subjugation of African Americans’ (Rome, 2002, p. 71). The construction of the criminal black man also serves to deflects attention away from white men’s legal ownership and sexual exploitation of black women’s bodies during slavery and their continued vulnerability today (Hooks, 1981). The legacy of slavery, and later legal, social, and geographical segregation, economic marginalisation, institutionalised racism, police profiling and carceral apartheid are not explored in the film, leaving intact the myth of the black criminal.

A later scene where an older white man is depicted as attempting to sexually exploit Carolyn (similar to *Traffik*’s) is given little play since the worse degradation has already occurred when she sexually transgressed both her class, and race.

**Myth 5: only black and Latino men deal illegal drugs in the US, and drug ‘king pins’ and cartels are led by Mexican men who are cruel, sadistic, and greedy**

Later in the film *Traffic* the drug czar’s daughter Carolyn leaves drug treatment and heads straight for the black-inner city. We are informed by the scriptwriters that white girls who fall from grace can only get drugs from black dealers in the inner-city, rather than from dealers in their own upper-class neighbourhoods. However, there is little evidence that youths buy drugs from people outside of their own race, and their own neighbourhoods (Mauer, 1999; Riley, 1997). Contrary to stereotypes, white people are active in the illegal drug trade, and so are middle-and-upper-class people (Boyd, 1999; Morgan & Joe, 1997; Waldorf et al., 1991). Race profiling by the police, three-strikes out laws, conspiracy laws, and more severe penalties for crack–cocaine than powder cocaine, contributes to the high rates of arrest and conviction of black and Latino men in the US for drug offences. Although black people make up only about 13% of drug users in the US (there are five times as many white drug users), and have similar drug use rates as white people, black people comprise about

62.7% of prisoners sentenced for drug offences (Beatty, Holman & Schiraldi, 2000: 2). We can see how race comes into play in the enactment of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. From 1992 to 1994, roughly 96.5% of all federal prosecutions for crack offences in the US were of non-whites (Weich & Angula, 2000: 13). Black men are almost seven times more likely than white men to be imprisoned in federal and state prisons (United States Department of Justice, 1999: 9, 11). Since 1995, it is estimated that 35% of all black males aged 25–35 are moving through the criminal justice system as prisoners, paroles or probationers (Drucker, 1999). Police profiling of the poor, and men and women of colour is having a devastating impact on families and communities throughout the US.

The war on drugs in the US has contributed to not only staggering arrest rates for the poor, and Hispanic and black people, but increased drug trade, violence, AIDS, and drug overdose related deaths. More than two million adults are in prison in US, and a large percentage of these prisoners are non-violent drug offenders (United States Department of Justice, 1999: 3). Contrary to propaganda about arresting the ‘king pin,’ 80% of arrests in the US are for possession and 45% are for marijuana (Beatty et al., 2000: 1).

Most people in inner-city neighbourhoods do not use or sell illegal drugs; however for some, drug selling is one response to structural economic marginalisation, sexism, and racism that keeps minorities out of the legitimate labour market (Bourgois, 1995). Most people (of all classes) do not set out to become a drug dealer, rather they ‘drift’ into selling drugs in order to get a better deal, or better quality drugs (Waldorf et al., 1991). *Traffic* does attempt to demonstrate that upper-class people are active in high-level drug dealing in America. However, this message is limited because Carlos is Latino, the media’s favourite drug trafficker, and we learn that his class status was achieved through criminal activity. We come to understand that Carlos’ wife will go to great lengths to protect their way of life. The film maintains the myth of ‘foreign’ drug traffickers, source countries, and cartel ideology remains intact. In *Traffic*, Mexican cartels are constructed as all powerful, and ‘taking them down’ is represented as symbolic of US power.

Contrary to the message in *Traffic*, drug cartels are more myth than reality. ‘High level dealing is more commonly done by individuals, couples or loose networks,’ that are fluid (Dorn & South, 1993). Foreign cartels have never solely controlled the cocaine market, evidenced by the fact that cocaine prices have been declining in the US since the 1970s (Woodiwess, 2001: 387). Governments could easily stop the illegal drug trade if it was controlled by a few cartels, for once the leaders were eliminated the market would crash. Cartel theories, similar to organised crime and mafia conspi-

racy theory masks the fact that governments, corporations, professionals, and respectable business institutions are involved in the illegal drug trade and organised criminal activity (Woodiwess, 2001). Woodiwess (2001) states that in the US organised crime activity is not a foreign import, or run by groups outside of American life, nor is it a serious threat, because it compliments both the economic and political structure. As well, the Americanisation of drug law globally (see Nadelmann, 1993) which has been achieved through international treaties, aid, and pressure encourages drug-related criminal activity in and outside of the US.

The racist imagery of black and Mexican people in *Traffic* is startling. Mexico is depicted as barbaric and uncivilised, where life is cheap, and the military and police are violent, corrupt and involved in drug trafficking. The authorities (who are drug dealers) are ruthless and sadistic (evidenced by a torture scene). There is no examination of the negative racial stereotypes presented in the film, and how these images have served to justify US intervention in Mexico since the Mexican–American War. Mexican, and men of colour have historically been constructed by US filmmakers as ‘sinister and evil’ (Castro, 2002). Since the late 1950s, Mexican men have been depicted in Hollywood films as dangerous drug pushing monsters who commit terrible criminal acts against innocent white people (Castro, 2002). These negative media constructions serve as tools to justify US intervention in Mexico, race profiling, criminalisation, and subjugation at home.

Unlike the British version *Traffik*, the American version of *Traffic* centres on the relationship between an ‘honest’ Mexican police officer and the American DEA. We see the world of drug trafficking through their eyes, rather than through the eyes of the rural farmers as in the British version. No mention is made of CIA involvement in drug trafficking, the more than six million adults moving through the criminal justice system in the US (in prison, probation and parole), and state regulation and punishment of the poor, black, and Hispanic communities in and outside of the US.

*Traffic* offers no analysis of how by providing aid to the police and military to fight the war on drugs, rather than contributing substantial social and economic aid, the US contributes to violence and instability in Mexico and other nations. Nor is there a consideration of the US certification process, military operations, crop eradication programs, and chemical warfare (such as using paraquat on marijuana and opium fields in Mexico in 1969). These programs have been a dismal failure and cause immense suffering outside the US (Bullington, 1993; Naiman, 1996). Poppy and coca plants are grown because they are profitable and for the masses of people who live below the poverty line, there are few other options in a global economic system that favours US interests. Thus, the war on drugs fuels

domestic instability and corruption in Mexico. Similar to the war on drugs at home, it is the poor that suffer in Mexico. Foreign debt, and trade agreements, with the US has limited reform efforts in Mexico. Since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 poverty has been rising, jobs are more scarce, and wages are declining while a small sector of Mexican society is getting richer and foreign investors are prospering (Chomsky, 2000: 99, 207). Chomsky and others have also noted the war on drugs is one way to halt any democratic peasant movement that threatens US capitalist interests (Naiman, 1996). However, in the film *Traffic*, NAFTA is only depicted as opening the US–Mexican border, fuelling a ‘free for all’ for foreign cartels that must be contained.

Since US interventions are not explored to any extent in the film *Traffic* we are left to believe that greed, corruption, and violence are inherent to Mexican authorities and cartels that threaten US citizen’s safety. The audience is informed that ‘in Mexico law enforcement is an entrepreneurial activity’ in contrast to the US. Protecting the borders of the US from the ‘drug threat’ is viewed by the US government as a top priority in the war on drugs. Guarding the US border means controlling drug policy in foreign nation states that are viewed as ‘drug-source’ countries. In the *US national drug control strategy: 2001 annual report* Mexico is represented as a key drug-source country (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2001). US citizens are instructed that the war on drugs is being waged in ‘foreign’ countries now, rather than waged against US citizens. But the truth of the matter is that the war on drugs is fought on many fronts, at home, and abroad. Yet, the myth that the enemy (the trafficker) resides outside of the US, and that foreign military and police are corrupt and incompetent, which justifies intervention, is reinforced in the film *Traffic*. Focus on supplier countries also distracts attention from US’s production of illegal drugs, its appetite for them, and police corruption at home.

On the home front, policing drugs is depicted as dangerous work. Interestingly, the two DEA officers in the movie are black and Latino which deflects attention from the fact that black and Latino men and women are most vulnerable to drug arrests and imprisonment in the US even though their drug rate use is no higher than white people. Law-enforcement agents in western nations often claim that they daily face risks to their lives in defending innocent citizens against criminal activity (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2001), and in *Traffic* the DEA agents are constructed as honest and heroic, in contrast to their corrupt Mexican counterparts. The media daily tells us that policing is a dangerous job. This is reinforced in *Traffic* when the Latino DEA officer is killed in a car bombing set up by the American dealer’s wife. Not to make less of any loss

of life or injury that occurs on the job, but occupations such as ‘mining, construction, transportation, and agriculture’ are much more dangerous jobs than policing (Kappeler, Blumberg & Potter, 1996: 216).

Both the British mini-series *Traffik* and the US film *Traffic* depict the lone enforcement agent. In the US version it is the black DEA officer, who risks his safety by illegally planting a ‘bug’ in Carlos’ home after he is acquitted of drug trafficking. Conventional myths about the futility of the legal process, and the integrity of the lone cop who heroically performs illegal acts to lock up drug dealers are maintained; for it is made clear that no matter what the odds against him, he ‘will get his man’ and his revenge. The drug trafficker is demonised, which legitimises DEA coercion, illegal practices, and appeals for more power.

#### **Myth 6: female drug dealers are more deviant than their male partners are**

Although the two movies, *Traffik* and *Traffic*, are substantially different from one another, they both portray ‘king pin’ traffickers as sadistic, cruel, and insatiable. As well, in both movies, the women married to drug dealers are depicted as capable of more evil than their male counterparts. In order to maintain their rich lifestyle, and to free their husbands from the criminal justice system, both wives transgress the law and conventional gender roles by being depicted as callous, and scheming, and eventually planning and carrying out drug trafficking, and murder. In the US film *Traffic*, the assassin (hired by the wife) who is depicted as a psychopathic gay man, represents America’s pathologising of homosexuality. It is assumed that being gay equals participating in other deviant, and violent acts.

The American drug dealer’s wife is portrayed as devious. While maintaining an image of maternal (she is visibly pregnant), wifely innocence to the police, she drives across the Mexican–American border to find her husband’s cocaine connection and starts up business again. When the Mexican dealer suggests she sample the cocaine or there is no deal, she vehemently states she’s pregnant, thus sending the ‘correct’ message to the audience; nevertheless, she is represented as having no moral qualms about arranging for the murder of the informant who will testify against her husband in criminal court. The message is loud and clear. Women married to drug dealers are complicit and more dangerous than their husbands are even though they appear innocent.

The British mini-series *Traffik* is just as problematic in its depiction of the wife of the German drug trafficker, for after her husband is arrested she also resumes business and plans the murder of the state informant. When her husband is released she resists his

attempts to go on a vacation with him and to have sex. She is no longer interested and she has no time for these more domestic activities. Her only interest is setting up the next drug deal. Both women in *Traffic* and *Traffik* are portrayed as murderous, cunning and ruthless. In contrast, outside of film depictions, women are most often victims of male violence, rather than the perpetrator of violence (Chesney-Lind & Bloom, 1997; Faith, 1993). Although women are involved in the higher echelons of drug dealing (Morgan & Joe, 1997), most often they have little access to such power, which reflects the social and economic conditions of their lives. Drug mules, accurately depicted in the British series *Traffik*, are often poor women of colour who are very vulnerable to arrest. In the US, women’s incarceration has increased at a faster rate than men’s over the last decade, and this increase is due to sentencing for drug offences; today one in three women are serving time in prisons for a drug offence (Amnesty International, 1999). The majority of these prisoners are women of colour.

Feminist writers have drawn our attention to how women in conflict with the law are depicted in film (Birch, 1994; Chesney-Lind, 1999; Clover, 1999; Faith, 1993; Hart, 1994; Thornham, 1999). Faith (1993) notes that real women’s voices are rarely heard in Hollywood films. White women, especially daughters, are often portrayed as the hapless victim, led astray by men into addiction and crime, but women of colour are constructed as more masculine and rarely as worth saving (Rafter, 1990: 143). Women are also portrayed as not being what they really are, their crime is hidden from view and later revealed; they are constructed as unpredictable and unmanageable (Mills, 1999). Mothers who use drugs are depicted as even more evil because it is wrongly assumed that their ‘compulsion’ to use drugs supersedes their mothering instinct (Boyd, 1999). Non-drug using pregnant women and mothers of young children are also viewed as dangerous and out of control-ruled by their biology. In both films daughters are depicted as passive and mothers as aggressive and dangerous.

#### **Conclusion**

The British film *Traffik* successfully explores how western drug policy and the denial of aid impact third world countries if policy is not initiated or successful. Throughout the British mini-series an attempt is made to demonstrate how the war on drugs shapes international relations, domestic policy, communities, and families. We witness the uselessness of crop eradication programs, and how growing poppies, and opium itself, are integral to Pakistani society, and that using heroin on the streets, and in the homes, of London is quite different from smoking, and drinking, opium tea. The

film emphasises the western world's unquenchable thirst for drugs and the failure of the war on drugs. Illegal drug use is viewed as a western problem, not the problem of Pakistan, but one that is changing the shape of drug use, and the economy in Pakistan.

It is difficult to assess whether the story presented in *Traffik* would be different if it was produced in Britain today. It is over 10 years since the mini-series was first shown on British television and the differences between the two productions may be due to temporal trends. As well, differences in British and US drug policy and culture may have shaped the two productions. Crime control has always been a central feature of British drug policy, and it has historically been heavily influenced by the US (MacGregor, 1998). Nevertheless, Britain is still perceived as a nation that offers public health and harm reduction initiatives rather than just crime control. Activists and drug workers in North America continue to view Britain as having more practical and less moralistic drug policy. British drug policy does not resemble 'the disastrous control regime pursued in the USA' (South, 1998, p. 90). However, critics note that drug policy has turned from past public health practices due to Thatcher's 'get tough on crime' mandate, and more recently under the leadership of Tony Blair and the Labour party. Since 1997 there has been a shift away from public health policy to linking drugs with crime (Stimson, 2000). Repeatedly, Blair has supported the war on drugs, and uses drug war language like menace, threat, and scourge linking drugs with crime, and family and community breakdown.

Also the war on terrorism continues to shape drug policy. Opium poppy production and trafficking in Afghanistan is being linked to terrorist groups and domestic consumers, even though advocates of the war acknowledge that the Taliban later sought to limit poppy production and there is evidence that the Northern Alliance is complicit in production and trafficking (Meek, 2001). Both US and British politicians, and the public, appear to have forgotten the role of the CIA in Pakistan, and its impact on the rise of the Taliban.

Nevertheless, the American version *Traffic* is very different than *Traffik*. Although the American film has been praised for its accurate depiction of the war on drugs and its questioning of waging 'war on your family,' it also leaves intact and perpetuates many myths that serve to fuel punitive policy and race, class, and gender inequality. For example, western drug use is viewed as pathological, a disease that must be treated, and no alternative views of drug use are offered in the film. We never witness recreational, spiritual, or medical use of illegal drugs, or addiction that is normalised rather than pathologised. We are left with the image that 'foreign' cartels are all powerful and non-white drug dealers are greedy, and violent. These 'outsiders' are constructed as a threat to morality, the family, and the

nation, which justifies continued US criminal justice intervention. The 'new' female drug dealer is depicted as more ruthless than her male counterparts, and passive daughters are victims corrupted and led astray by 'outsiders' to white middle-class America.

*Traffic* ignores the experience of poor rural farmers who grow coca and other criminalised crops, and who are coerced into the role of drug mule. It never seriously explores who the drug dealer is. Nor does the film ask why specific drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin are illegal and demonised in the US, rather than tobacco and alcohol which are our most toxic drugs. Instead illegal drug use is sexualised, racialised and pathologised, and the poor are viewed as supplying the rich with their drug of choice. An alternative view would have been to portray drug use and selling as shaped by political, legal, social and cultural factors. A radical view would have explored how the war on drugs serves US imperialist and economic interests, and fuels race, class, and gender inequality and oppression in and outside of the US. Nevertheless, in honour of *Traffic*'s 'accurate depiction' of drug use it received a PRISM award for best theatrical feature film in 2001.

The US does not stand alone in its drug policy, still today no other nation in the world has equal economic and political power. Thus US drug policy and views on criminal justice carry a lot of weight. The threat of sanctions and denial of foreign aid can limit other nation's autonomy. So can drug war (and war on terrorism) rhetoric that constructs all those opposed to US policy as the enemy. This is both sad and ironic given that the US has the highest official crime rate and prison population of any other western nation, and a significant proportion are non-violent drug offenders. Unfortunately, the Americanisation of the mass media and drug law throughout the world contributes to a lack of alternative views about drug use, and responses to it. TV, and US films, often present drug issues in a 'simplistic, nonsubstantial, nonhistorical, and noncontextual' way, and foremost, information is 'packaged as entertainment' (Postman, 1986: 141).

Films can both reflect conventional ideologies about drug issues and challenge them. However, films that challenge the very foundations of drug policy including structural inequality, foreign and domestic economic policy, and punishment industries, are rare. The medium of film is limited due to its dual role as a source of entertainment, and profit. Nevertheless, there has always been resistance to drug war ideology and punitive drug policy, and occasionally films depict these acts of rebellion. Ideologies about drugs and social life are not fixed, and movie viewers are not passive receptors. Rather ideologies are continuously being negotiated in real life and on film. Cultural criminologists recognise that deviance, crime, and control are social constructions, so to are responses to them. Film is one of many

mediums that communicates ideological messages about drugs, crime, and justice. In the future we may have a resurgence of films which are both pleasurable to view and serve as a ‘counterpunch to the belly of authority’ (Ferrell, 1997: 146). Such films will serve as a template to shift our understanding about drug issues to one where altered states of consciousness are no longer criminalised, racialised, sexualised, and pathologised. Rather we can begin to view drug use as a legitimate activity accepted as part of the fabric of life.

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