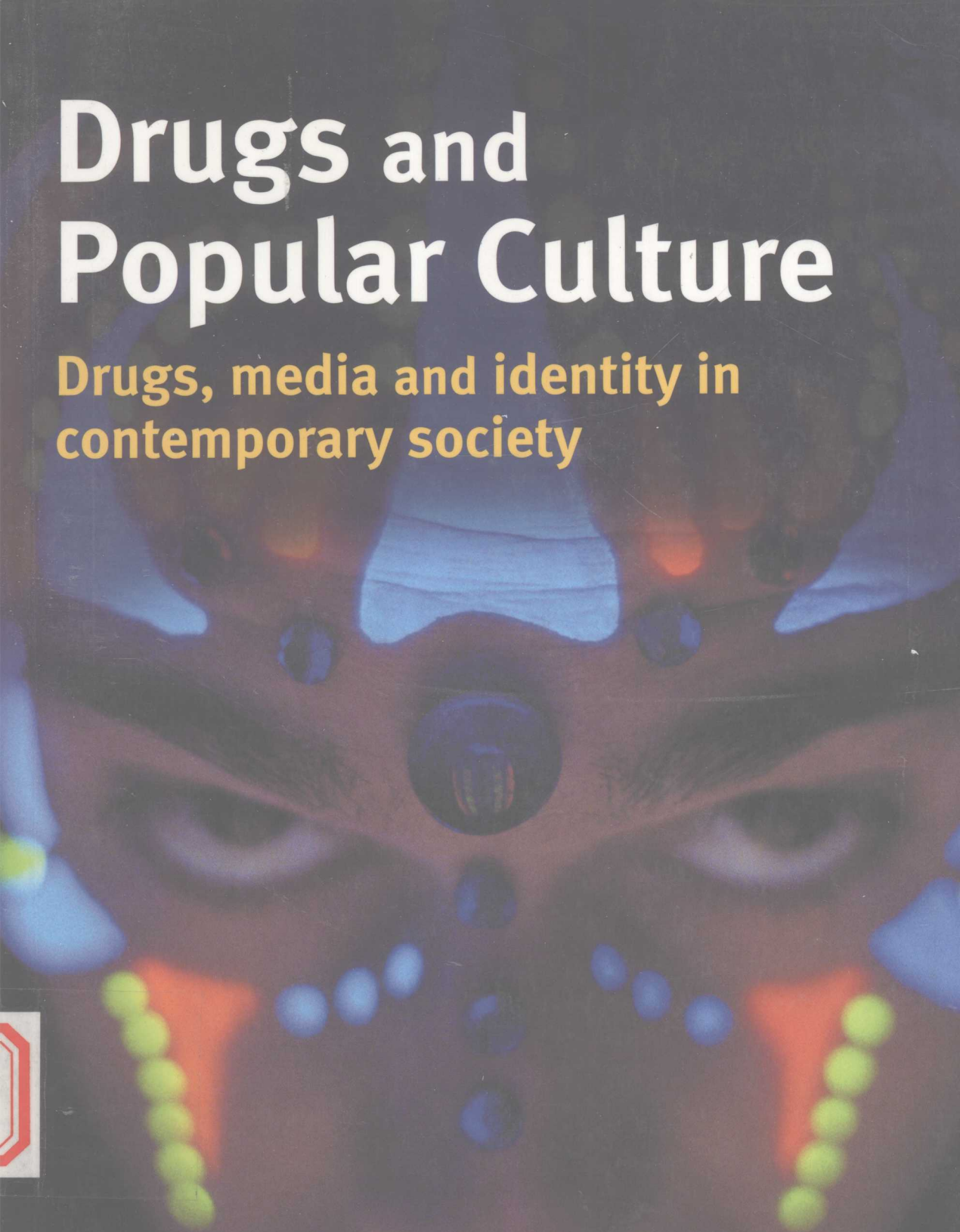
Drugs and Popular Culture

Drugs, media and identity in contemporary society



WILLAN
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EDITED BY
PAUL MANNING

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Published by

Willan Publishing
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Cullompton, Devon
EX15 3AT, UK
Tel: +44(0)1884 840337
Fax: +44(0)1884 840251
e-mail: info@willanpublishing.co.uk
website: www.willanpublishing.co.uk

Published simultaneously in the USA and Canada by

Willan Publishing
c/o ISBS, 920 NE 58th Ave, Suite 300,
Portland, Oregon 97213-3786, USA
Tel: +001(0)503 287 3093
Fax: +001(0)503 280 8832
e-mail: info@isbs.com
website: www.isbs.com

First published 2007

Hardback
ISBN-13: 978-1-84392-211-7

Paperback
ISBN-13: 978-1-84392-210-0

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Project managed by Deer Park Productions, Tavistock, Devon
Typeset by GCS, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, LU7 1AR
Printed and bound by T.J. International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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Part I

Context, Theory and History

Introduction

Paul Manning

In an episode of the television drama *Shameless*, broadcast on Channel Four in February 2006, Lip, one of the main young characters seeks relief from his relationship troubles in the familiar pub of the series. Leaning wearily across the bar he orders a pint of lager, a whisky chaser and an 'E' from the barman who supplements his pub wages with a little local drug dealing. This is interesting for two reasons: firstly, because it portrays a picture of routine, normalised but illegal, recreational drug use which is not so very far removed from the everyday lived realities of many 'ordinary' young people in the UK today. Customers may not be able to order recreational drugs from the counter in pubs yet, but they are quite likely to be on sale somewhere near the bar. And secondly, it is interesting for the point that within the show this scene is presented as a fleeting, mundane moment of little consequence. Other, much more exciting things happen to Lip in this episode and his consumption of lager, whisky and ecstasy is represented as little more significant than what he had for lunch.

Here, then, is popular television drama offering us a picture of normalised poly-drug use as routine, everyday life. And, of course, this is hardly an isolated example of the representation of drug use in popular culture. From cinema, through television and popular fiction, to contemporary popular music (Blake (Chapter 5), Carter (Chapter 9) and Esan (Chapter 11) in this volume), the imagery of widespread drug consumption has, itself, become normalised. Even the moralising British daily red-top newspapers appear almost as frequently to condone as to condemn celebrity 'soft drug' use. In short, the media institutions that circulate and reproduce commodified forms of popular culture are very much more comfortable in dealing with themes of drug consumption than in previous decades. It is tempting to attribute this to important changes in 'real', lived popular culture: perhaps more films and television dramas feature drug consumption because more people see drug use as a normalised pattern of consumption. Measham and Brain (2005) point to a new 'culture of intoxication', suggesting that both alcohol and illegal drug use are now much more central elements in the dance and club cultures supported by the expanding commercial leisure industry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Indeed, some critics point to the part played by the alcohol and club-based leisure industries in marketing, promoting

and implicitly fostering this 'culture of intoxication' (Blake in Chapter 5 of this volume; Measham and Bain 2005). However, it is important to retain the distinction between *representations* of drug use through media and cultural institutions, and the cultural practices of those actually consuming drugs. In other words, an examination of the place of drug consumption in popular culture involves a consideration of both mainstream media representations and the 'real' cultural practices of ordinary people.

This volume brings together contributions from 15 different authors, who approach the relationship between drug use and popular culture from distinct disciplinary positions, including sociology, criminology, cultural studies, media studies and film studies. The approach is, thus, inter-disciplinary in bringing together contributions from these distinct disciplines, but it is hoped that this produces more than simply a collection of discrete papers. There is a coherence in that each discipline helps to illuminate the ways in which representations of drug consumption are mediated and the ways in which the cultural practices of drug consumption are reproduced through the micro-politics of daily life.

Licit and illicit drug consumption have always been lived elements of popular culture and, for that reason, have always provided subject matter for popular cultural texts. However, the approaches within this volume help us to explore the extent to which the popular cultural practices associated with drug consumption, and their mediated representations, have shifted from the sub-cultural to the mainstream. While there are some differences in approach and emphasis, the various contributions to this volume share a number of key assumptions. Firstly, there is, of course, the view that drug consumption is a popular cultural practice and that its mediations through society are of importance. For example, the very distinction between licit and illicit drugs is maintained through cultural definitions that are socially and politically administered. That, in some cases, these distinctions blur or erode, is itself, further confirmation of their cultural nature. Secondly, while by no means all explicitly embracing the vocabulary of this analysis, in practice, all the approaches within this volume tell us something about the symbolic frameworks within which patterns of drug consumption are framed or understood. These symbolic frameworks construct particular substances in particular ways, by associating such substances with certain social groups or identities rather than others, and by mobilising particular forms of language, and symbolism (Manning 2006 and Manning in this volume). Each of these chapters makes a contribution to understanding how and why these symbolic frameworks are reproduced and how they change, through processes of representation in television, cinema, newspapers and other media, or by examining the place of these symbolic frameworks in popular culture and everyday life. More work needs to be done, particularly of an ethnographic kind, in terms of exploring the ways in which media representations of drugs and the understandings of drug consumption, constructed at the micro-level in the course of everyday life, may intersect. But an approach that places the construction of symbolic frameworks, through mainstream media, and in the course of daily life at the micro level, has a lot of potential for future enquiry.

Another common assumption underpinning the approaches here is that the symbolic frameworks of drug consumption or substance misuse are historically specific and historically rooted. The language, symbols, imagery and associations with particular social identities that make up these symbolic frameworks, all have histories. They are a product, in part, of the exertion of power at specific historical moments, but also through the contests and skirmishes involving those 'at the bottom' as popular culture serves as a site of resistance to subordination. Andrew Blake in Chapter 2 provides an account of the imperialist pressures and colonial discourses at play in the construction of the discourses around opium and cannabis use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This story is picked up and developed through the twentieth century as a backdrop to Simon Cross' analysis of confused public debate over cannabis classification (Chapter 7). As Andrew Blake underlines, in this imperial history, we find the roots of a number of powerful symbols and discourses, that are still at play and continue to contribute to contemporary symbolic frameworks. This chapter demonstrates very clearly the ways in which medical and political, as well as popular discourses generated symbolic frameworks that often racialised drug consumption and these frameworks surfaced, and re-surfaced, not only in official policy documents but in popular culture – nineteenth century novels and twentiety century cinema, the fiction of Dickens and Fleming, together with films about Fu Manchu. Significantly, this chapter also points to the cultural significance, during this historical period, of drug paraphernalia – the equipment or technology of consumption. The symbolism of the equipment, as well as the substances, is an important component of each symbolic framework of 'substance misuse'.

The first chapter in Part 1, however, provides a review of the main attempts to theorise the relationship between drug consumption and popular culture. It discusses the movement away from understanding drug consumption as a symptom of individual 'weakness', that characterised many of the most important approaches in the inter-war and immediate post-war years. Drug users at this time were often theorised as being in the grip 'forces' either located within the weak individual (moral weakness, psychological flaws, for example), or externally and signified by the inability of weak individuals to adjust to their social circumstances, if facing the 'blocked opportunities' typical of working class life. However, by the end of the twentieth century, there are very significant theoretical shifts that take account of the growing importance of consumption within popular culture, and of the centrality of media in contemporary social formations. If consumption and popular culture now occupy positions at the heart of late modern capitalism, then drug consumption is a further extension of the same cultural practices. If identity is invested in the things we consume, it is possible to see 'drug styles' (individual patterns of choice) in the context of the self-narratives individuals construct to make sense of themselves and their locations. These drug consumers are not necessarily either passive or weak. The constraints or possibilities of class, or gender, locality or ethnicity, have not disappeared. But contemporary social theory sees the development of 'drug styles' as part of the way in which individuals negotiate their experience of these structures to construct their

own narratives. The remaining chapters in this book continue to prompt the intriguing questions: 'do the symbolic frameworks' mediated by mainstream or 'micro' media provide some of the resources whereby individuals use to think how they 'frame' different substances, who or what identities they associate those substances with, and how they choose to consume them.

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1. An introduction to the theoretical approaches and research traditions

Paul Manning

Introduction

Early social and cultural theoretical approaches tended to focus either upon the 'real' social practices within drug consuming subcultures, or upon the ways in which drug consumption was represented or mis-represented in media coverage. Less attention was given to the, possibly quite subtle, relationships between each of these dimensions. Thus, for example, 'classical' moral panic theory has tended to begin with discussions of mainstream media representations, and to move from these to potential impacts upon policing, policy making or spectacular forms of deviancy amplification. But the rapidly changing media landscape of the twenty-first century seems too complex for unamended or 'classical' moral panic theory. Some critics question whether an overriding concern with 'mainstream media' is so relevant to an age in which many members of the public (including, of course, younger, potential drug consumers) gather so much of their information from 'less mainstream', media sources, such as fanzines, the music press, and electronic sources (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). And secondly, to offer models of 'media essentialism' which locate problems entirely in terms of media representation and not at all in terms of 'real' behaviours seems equally problematic (Murji 1998; Schlesinger 1990).

Significantly for the concerns of this book, the more recent criminological and sociological work on patterns of drug use has found it important to take account of the cultural and media contexts within which drug consumption occurs. Thus, for example, Measham, Aldridge and Parker (2001) locate contemporary recreational drug use within the context of dance culture and its antecedents in earlier youth subcultural forms, while Hammersley, Khan and Ditton (2002) include an extended discussion of perceptions held by their respondents of the media and symbolic representation of drugs, alongside data on patterns of use. The wider media effects debate is beyond the concerns of this volume. However, one of the assumptions underpinning the approaches in this book is that while media and symbolic representations of drug consumption and drug users should be distinguished from the *actual* social and cultural practices of drug use, it is important to acknowledge the possible interplays between the two. Such interplays are likely to be complex and

certainly not mono-causal. For example, Hammersley, Khan and Ditton report that many of their ecstasy using respondents claimed to despise mainstream media representations of drug use and yet, 'a surprisingly large' number of these respondents indicated that they relied upon media rather than friends for their drug information (2002: 116). An equally complex picture is painted by Jenkins' study of 'designer drugs' in the US. Jenkins notes, on the one hand, growing public scepticism with regard to the more lurid drug scare stories circulated in the news media because an increasing proportion of the news audience has direct or indirect experience of drug use against which it can assess news media claims (1999: 18–19). And yet, Jenkins also thinks it possible that some patterns of media and popular cultural representation can have some impact in shaping fashions in drug use through the construction of symbolic frameworks that valorise particular drugs, or particular ways of consuming them (1999: 94). He cites the film treatments of heroin use in *Pulp Fiction*, *Trainspotting*, and *Killing Zoe*.

While subsequent chapters explore in more detail the various dimensions of 'normalisation' (see Part 2), we shall see in the development of social and cultural theory a shift in basic assumptions about the extent of drug use and the centrality of its place in popular culture. Early theories, whether pharmacological, psychological or sociological, assumed that drug use was exceptional, deviant and abnormal, located only amongst a small proportion of the population. Cultures associated with such drug use were equally seen as pathological and segregated from 'normal' everyday life. Contemporary theorising in this area has moved significantly from these assumptions. Informed by the empirical research on drug experiences amongst the 'normal' population over the last two decades, contemporary social and cultural theory is now much more likely to acknowledge the commonplace of drugs within popular cultures. Recent social and cultural theory has sought to describe the experiences of those living in a late modern or post-modern world, in which symbolic resources are routine prerequisites to ordinary life and the huge variety of media are central to our social experience (Jameson 1998; Lash 1994; Giddens 1991). While earlier theory largely maintained a demarcation between the social practices of drug consumption, on the one hand, and spheres of cultural production and media representation, on the other, contemporary theories of drug use within popular culture seem to pose interesting questions about the interplay between each, as popular culture is made and reproduced.

Beyond the bio-psychological

It may be helpful to begin by considering what kinds of explanation cultural and social theory can be distinguished from. A number of important explanations of illicit drug use to emerge in the post-war period were rooted in psychological or psycho-biological explanations of human behaviour. Such models seek to understand illicit drug use as 'caused' either by a genetically linked problem, a medical disease, individual moral weakness, as a product of 'inappropriate' conditioning and social learning processes, or as a combination

of a plurality of these micro-level processes (Bean 2002: 16–19; Anderson 1995). In each instance, the primary concern lies with the individual illicit drug user as the site of analysis and a variety of individual treatments are offered, from detoxification and cognitive therapies, through to simple moral exhortation.

It would be foolish to entirely dismiss the psychological, or indeed, in certain circumstances, the biological or medical in seeking to 'explain' drug behaviour, particularly when considering the case of those users at the 'hard' end of the drug continuum, frequently the victims of multiple deprivations, including the emotional and familial, as well as the socio-economic. Nevertheless, the critics point to what such approaches do not address and for the purposes of considering the relationship between drug consumption and popular culture, these elements are important. In biological and psychological models we rarely find much attention given to the meanings or symbolic frameworks of drug consumption, shared amongst drug consumers, or indeed between these social groups and wider communities. In many of the social and cultural theories discussed below there is an emphasis upon the importance of the social, and in the shared symbolic universe, amongst drug users. It is hard to deny the social and cultural dimensions and the answers they suggest to questions that otherwise seem inexplicable. Why, for example, if drug use is best understood as a medical problem, do so many young people simply grow out of the 'disease' (Parker, Aldridge and Measham 1998: 20)? The great danger in adopting only psychological or psycho-biological models is that they 'individualise' patterns of drug consumption, in turn encouraging an understanding which is concerned only with individual pathology, rather than in terms of the play of social, symbolic and cultural energies (Anderson 1995). After all, it is difficult to explain the evidence of significantly widening drug use amongst those below the age of 35, discussed in Part 2 of this volume (the 'normalisation' of recreational drug use) strictly in terms of behavioural or disease models. That is, unless there has been an alarming recent increase in individual pathologies and behavioural problems in a number of late, modern Western societies.

The critique of pharmacological determinism

One element that all the social and cultural theoretical approaches considered here share, from the anthropological to sociological theories of late modernity, is a rejection of approaches that exclusively emphasise the potency of narcotics and chemicals, over the realms of culture and symbolism. In other words, all the theoretical approaches discussed below take the view that it is not the pharmacological power of particular drugs that provides the key to understanding the social and cultural practices associated with drug consumption but, rather, that it is the social and cultural practices that lend *meaning* to the perceived physiological effects of drugs. It is the cultural aspects that shape the use of drugs rather than the other way around.

An example from a recent ethnographic study of club culture illustrates the point. For Malbon, the use of drugs, such as ecstasy, were not the cause