

## Social imaginaries of addictions in series: representations of hypermodernity

### *Imaginarios sociales de las adicciones en las series: representaciones de la hipermodernidad*

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#### **Abstract**

This article briefly introduces a historicization of drug use, from the rituals of Antiquity to hypermodernity, a time characterized by hyper-individualism and the fall of ideals, where drug use appears related to an individual experience and alienation. Faced with the exponential increase in drug use in recent decades, we wonder about the characteristics of substance consumption and what are the social imaginaries about this problem, that is, how society understands this use. One of the privileged ways to access these social imaginaries is through cultural products such as literature, cinema or series. Considering that series are gradually replacing television as privileged forms of consumption by thousands of daily viewers through online platforms, we are interested in studying the representation of drug use that is made in current series. The analysis panorama includes the representation of "hard" drugs in the characterization of anti-heroic characters and in young characters from narratives of the coming-of-age genre, as well as in iconic series that showed the world of drugs such as *The Wire*. Also included is the analysis of problematic alcohol consumption in university professors and addiction to other drugs such as opioids. This complex kaleidoscope allows us to understand the coordinates of current consumption, which do not always imply an addiction, but which in all cases imply different degrees of suffering.

#### **Keywords**

Addictions; Drugs; Social imaginaries; Hypermodernity; Series.

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## Resumen

En este artículo se introduce brevemente una historización del consumo de drogas, desde los rituales de la Antigüedad hasta llegar a la hipermodernidad como una época caracterizada por el hiper-individualismo y la caída de los ideales, donde el consumo de drogas aparece relacionado con una experiencia individual y alienada. Frente al aumento exponencial del consumo de drogas en las últimas décadas, nos preguntamos por sus características y cuáles son los imaginarios sociales sobre esta problemática, es decir, cómo la sociedad entiende este consumo. Una de las formas privilegiadas de acceder a estos imaginarios sociales es a través de productos culturales como la literatura, el cine o las series. Teniendo en cuenta que las series reemplazan paulatinamente a la televisión como formas de consumo privilegiadas por miles de espectadores diarios a través de plataformas en línea, nos interesa estudiar la representación del consumo de drogas que se hace en las series actuales. El panorama de análisis incluye la representación de las drogas “duras” en la caracterización de personajes antiheroicos y en personajes jóvenes de narrativas del género *coming-of-age*, así como también en series icónicas que mostraron el mundo de las drogas como *The Wire*. Se incluye también el análisis del consumo problemático de alcohol en personajes docentes universitarios y la adicción a fármacos como los opioides. Este complejo caleidoscopio nos permite entender las coordenadas de consumo actuales, que no siempre implican una adicción, pero que en todos los casos implican grados variables de padecimiento.

## Palabras clave

Adicciones; Drogas; Imaginarios sociales; Hipermodernidad; Series.

## INTRODUCTION: BRIEF HISTORICIZATION OF DRUG USE AND PRESENTATION OF OUR APPROACH

The relationship of the human being with drugs is ancient and much broader than what we know as *addiction*, which as such is about two hundred years old. In fact, the use of drugs has acquired, under certain conditions, the status of a health problem only recently.

In Antiquity, some religions used hemp -today known as marijuana- mainly to ac-

company meditation (Escotado, 1998). In pre-modern societies, drug use is carried out under the coordinates of ritual, making ceremonial use of hallucinogens based on elements typical of the tradition of that community (Carrere, 2018).

In Greco-Roman culture, the term *pharmakon* began to be used to refer to drugs, with a double meaning: remedy and poison. It is not about one thing or the other, but about both, inseparably: the cure and the threat (Escotado, 1998; Le Poulichet, 1990). Some drugs are more toxic and others less, but none is a harmless substance. The toxicity is given by the ratio between the active dose and the lethal dose.



The appearance of drug addiction as a medical concept takes place in the context of the United States Civil War, between 1860 and 1865, which is when morphine began to be used systematically to soothe the pain of the wounded. At the end of the war, the addiction to this substance was evident and the phenomenon of withdrawal was discovered, which produced the entry of the issue of drug use into the field of health (Escobedo, 1998). In this sense, drug addiction is explained by dependence on the drug, both physically and psychologically.

Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, drugs began to have a fundamental place in certain ideologies, such as the hippie movement, and in a line of therapeutic experimentation that supports the belief that consuming certain drugs could more easily access the unconscious.<sup>1</sup>

Already in recent decades, due to the high prevalence of the consumption of illegal substances globally and its impact on other diseases (such as HIV transmission or hepatitis), the matter has decidedly entered the field of public health. In this line it is possible to find the definition provided by the World Health Organization on addiction:

Repeated use of one or more psychoactive substances, to the point that the user [...] becomes intoxicated periodically or continuously, has enormous difficulty in voluntarily stopping or modifying the use of the substance, and is determined to obtain substances psychoactive by any means. (1994, p. 13)

In turn, it is pointed out that the consumption of substances has a detrimental effect on

society and on the person, and this is included in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [DSM] (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Among the criteria for “Substance-related and addictive disorders” is mentioned the dangerous use of substances, social or interpersonal problems related to consumption, and non-compliance with the main social roles, whether at work or in the family.

However, the relational perspective on substance use indicates that the diversity of links that people can establish with substances must be taken into account, so addiction itself must be distinguished from the categories of substance use and abuse (Pons Diez, 2008; Touzé, 2006). The use of substances refers to a generally occasional, isolated consumption that does not have a significant presence in the person's life, such as experimental consumption. On the other hand, substance abuse represents a form of consumption that is risky for health, both due to the morbidity associated with the toxicity of the substances, and the interference that the psychoactive effect can have on certain behaviors (Pons Diez, 2008).

It should be noted that the difference between use, abuse and dependence is of a qualitative nature, related to the motivations and context of consumption, and not of a solely quantitative nature, linked to the quantity and frequency of consumption. For this reason, a problematic link with substances contemplates situations of sustained consumption over time as well as consumption only once, and even for the first time.

According to what Touzé (2010) proposes, drug use can be problematic for a person when it negatively affects -whether occasionally or chronically- one or more vital areas: physical or mental health; primary

<sup>1</sup> An exponent of this current was Timothy Leary, writer and psychologist who created psychedelic psychotherapy, who proposed the therapeutic and spiritual benefits of the use of LSD (Ulrich, 2018).



social relationships (family, partner, friends); secondary social relationships (work, study); relations with the law.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report 2022, published on June 27, 2022, 284 million people worldwide, aged 15 to 64 years old, used drugs in 2020. This implies an increase of 26% compared to 2010. It indicates that young people have a higher level of drug use than adults and that current levels of use in many countries are higher than those of the previous generation. In this special issue of the Magazine we will ask ourselves: What are the characteristics of substance use today? What representation do we have of this problem? How does today's society understand drug use?

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRESENT TIME

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To advance in some answers, we consider it pertinent to characterize the current era and describe how it affects substance use. Lipovetsky (2002) introduces the concept of hypermodernity, which is defined from the decadence of the postmodernity category, while we are in a historical moment in which the market has imposed its law, being accompanied by hyper-individualism. It is a time that lacks regulations and that occurs globally, in which the fall of ideals and repressions leads the subjects to an "anything goes". There is a tension between paradoxical and contradictory logics, permanently at stake, in a culture that combines excess and moderation. On the one hand, society tends towards massification, while consumption pushes towards anonymity, alienation and conformism. On the other hand, a movement in the opposite direction is generated, towards individualiza-

tion, in which hedonism, the cult of the body and autonomy prevail.

The transformations that have taken place at the cultural level bring with them a new subjectivity and new ways of relating. The condition of the subject has changed: in modernity the subject was basically a producer and was defined by family and work, the two basic entities of identity. Currently, the subject is defined by consumption, it is a consumer. This responds to the logic of the market, which requires that people become massive and do not create links with each other (Baudrillard, 1970; Bauman, 2007).

In this context, Lipovetsky (2002) talks about *trivialized drug addiction* to establish that there is a temporal fracture in relation to drug use in hypermodernity: there was a time when there was meaningful use, as long as it was linked to a certain epic, to an ideal of freedom and the search for new experiences; and another (the current one), meaningless. According to the author, drug addiction would have become a universal pathological form, a subjective form widespread today, which represents the narcissism, disenchantment and violence that characterize our time, without pursuing any ideal.

On the other hand, group or individual consumption has also changed. Returning to what was mentioned above, we are interested in highlighting that those ritualized uses of substances, both in Antiquity and within the framework of the hippie movement, somehow preserved the continuity of the bond with the other and the collective experience. This contrasts with the most frequent consumption in our culture today, in which "hallucination is presented in terms of 'trip' or 'flash', that is, as a merely individual experience in which the self is affected by a series of of sensations resulting from



the alteration of the perceptual apparatus" (Carrere, 2018, p. 38).

As we mentioned, it is evident that the relationship of the subjects with drugs is millenary and that throughout history there have been various ways of consumption, which do not necessarily imply addiction. Through this brief historicization we highlighted that "the addict" and "the drug" as such do not have an existence in themselves, but that they are discursive constructions that have been made around the figure of the drug user and that have been transforming over time, responding to the characteristics and beliefs of each era. Therefore, our purpose is to investigate how problematic substance use is represented today.

## SOCIAL IMAGINARIES OF ADDICTIONS IN CINEMA

Like any cultural product, cinema produces and reproduces moral and aesthetic meanings, especially in relation to contemporary issues, and it is an excellent way to analyze representations or social imaginaries (Cambra Badii & Martínez Lucena, 2020).

Social imaginaries are socially constructed perceptual schemes (Pintos, 1995) that in highly complex contexts allow to perceive, explain and act (Coca & Valero Matas, 2010). These imaginaries reflect the way in which people perceive themselves and society, and in turn allow these aspects to be modified by producing and reproducing different moral and behavioral meanings (Imbert, 2006).

A large number of films explicitly or implicitly address the issue of substance use, from different points of view -historical, moralistic or educational, law enforcement-, and

in relation to various situations and scenarios -drug trafficking, rehabilitation, consumption in adolescence, recreational consumption, etc. For this reason, the proposal of this monograph is based on the importance of studying consumer phenomena and their representation in audiovisual material today.

It is interesting to note that sinister characters who inject morphine or spend evenings in opium dens are portrayed in films already in the days of silent films and the early years of Hollywood. Among the first films to explicitly show drug use and its link to criminality were *The Chinese opium den* (Dickson, 1894) and *The opium smoker's dream* (Jasset, 1906) (Allen & Alberici, 2018; Cape, 2003; Shapiro, 2002). The characters are described as thugs and, in almost all cases, *vice* is the supreme example of their physical and/or moral degradation. These films show the racialization of drug users, thus initiating the association between certain types of substances with specific groups of people -which still happens in social imaginaries to this day-, while presenting the idea that drugs and their users constitute a threat to society (Boyd, 2008).

Denzin (1991) locates in American films produced between 1912 and 1989 a sub-genre that he defines as "alcoholic films", in which drunkenness, alcoholism or excessive alcohol consumption by one or more of the characters is presented. In them, the moral course of the protagonist usually presents three phases: the seduction of the substance, the fall from grace and then redemption.

Hirschman (1995) studies 12 films that focus on drug addiction, released between 1955 and 1990, and highlights that films about addiction manifest and communicate the concerns of popular culture of the historical moment in which they are located



or in which that were released. He finds a structural pattern around the figure of a woman who assists the man she loves, helping him to recover from his addiction, as in the classics *The lost weekend* (Wilder, 1945) and *The man with the golden arm* (Preminger, 1955). As for addiction in women, there seems to be an underlying ideology that places women as deserving of punishment and humiliation for abandoning their traditional roles and venturing into a truly masculine world, as in *The Days of Wine and Roses* (Edwards, 1962). In the film *Sid and Nancy* (Cox, 1986) we find the reverse of this pattern, which is consistent with the social changes of the 1980s, yet still carries the message that those who stray too far from the norm end up perishing, which replicates the tragic events of the protagonists of the aforementioned films.

Hirschman (1995) also analyzes the representation of addiction treatment in films. The author indicates that in general a positive image of rehabilitation treatments and Alcoholics Anonymous is presented, although it is hinted that they are not entirely effective. In those films that present rehabilitation programs in a negative way, the narrative usually associates the cure for addiction with the establishment of romantic relationships and not with the treatment itself. The already classic *Sid and Nancy* presents a methadone substitution program, which fails to prevent the protagonists from having a relapse and consuming again. Treatment failure appears to be attributed to the couple's outlaw lifestyle, inherent in their nihilistic and self-destructive traits.

Regarding the imaginaries of drug use after the 1990s in the cinema, Brumm (2005) points out that there is a usual representation that receives the name of "heroin chic":

attractive young adults, generally from the middle class, who go partying and looking for a sense of "experience" or fun. In turn, the negative aspects of drug use are made invisible, are rarely shown or are underestimated. Some examples of these films are *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996), *Pusher* (Winding Refn, 1996), *Wasted* (Paterson and Davids, 1997), *Mensaka/The Messenger* (García Ruiz, 1998), *Head On* (Akin, 1998) and *Human Traffic* (Kerrigan, 1999). The question that remains is what impact this type of film can have on the viewer: could it influence them to try drugs?

This question also remains in relation to the most popular movies of the last 20 years. According to Gunasekera, Chapman and Campbell (2005), these films usually represent negative health behaviors, such as unprotected sex between new partners, drug use, smoking and alcohol intoxication, but they do so in a positive way, that is, with a tendency to characterize their disinhibitory use as a fun experience, avoiding describing the consequences derived from this use of drugs and the scenarios of drug addiction and addiction treatment.

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## THE SERIES IN THE CURRENT HYPERMODERN PANORAMA

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Although all narrative forms articulate social values, life perspectives and aspirations, embodied in their characters or in their stories, in recent years we have witnessed a qualitative leap in the prevalence of series over cinema and literature. The ease of access to them through various devices (on TV, on the web, on the mobile phone or tablet) and the possibility of deferred viewing have led the public to have control of when, where and



what they see. The multiplication of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and HBO (Jenner, 2018; Raya et al., 2018) has deepened this phenomenon.

The series are located in the current era not only because of their production and modes of consumption, but also because of their very nature as a mass product and their addictive dimension. "Consequently, the fact that drugs are a recurring motif in the series is not surprising, because the series are also made as addictive products" (Wajcman, 2019, p. 102). In fact, a new form of consumption has emerged around this content: *binge-watching* or series marathon, which refers to the action of watching several episodes of the same television series continuously, and has led to the coining of the term *teleaddiction* (Carrión, 2014).

The interest generated by the series does not respond solely to the quantitative growth of the public or to the technological possibilities of the medium, but rather they involve communicative skills that the viewer assimilates through their aesthetic proposals, complex narrative frameworks and characters, which respond to diverse sociohistorical situations. According to López Gutiérrez and Nicolás Gavilán (2015), they constitute an object of study as complex universes that can be questioned based on two premises: what stories the series tell us and how they tell us. This prism from which the viewer sees his own reality has effects on his own cultural makeup, since he inadvertently incorporates "stable, repetitive, pervasive, and virtually inescapable patterns of images and ideologies that television provides" (Morgan and Shanahan, 1999, p. 5). So, we are not simply facing an entertainment or communication event, but rather a social

phenomenon in which television is officiated as "carrier/provocateur of meanings and a crucial part of the dynamics that maintain the social structure in a constant process of production and reproduction of meanings" (Fiske, 1987, p. 27). Social groups organize, decode and interact with television content, to reveal a wide range of cultural, political and economic manifestations (Cappello, 2017).

It is important to note that the largest volume of series comes from the industry in the United States, whose culture is an unavoidable benchmark for thinking about these formats and the way in which sociocultural problems are portrayed (Gómez Ponce, 2017). In this sense, Wajcman (2019) establishes that the American series found a new and singular grammar -which he calls *series-form*-, and this grammar is what structures the world and the representations we have of it. Thus, Wajcman (2010) determines that our world would then be structured as an American series.

According to the ranking of 21st century series prepared by the BBC (2021), the three best series are American and their central narrative revolves around drugs: *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008), *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007- 2015) and *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013). In fact, numerous series address the issue of drugs as the main aspect in their plot. On the one hand, there are those that focus on production and sales, such as *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013), *The lord of the skies* (Mejía and Vizzi, 2013-present), *Gomorra* (Gardini, Procacci and Tozzi, 2014-2019), *The Queen of the South* (Wills et al., 2011-2019), *The Black Widow* (Ferrer and García, 2014-2016), *Narcos* (Brancato, Newman and Bernard, 2015-2017), *The Wire*





(Simon, 2002-2008) and *Weeds* (Kohan, 2005-2012). Most of them refer to drug trafficking and follow the footsteps of the heads of well-known cartels. These are productions with police content and whose interest lies in criminal behavior associated with the world of drugs. On the other hand, *Breaking Bad* and *Weeds* portray the story of characters who seek some economic redemption in the sale of drugs, in order to provide what is necessary for their family. Both Walter White and Nancy Botwin -protagonists of these series- quickly generate empathy in the public, which minimizes the moral penalty for their actions.

In another line, in *Elementary* (Doherty et al., 2012-2019) and *The Cleaner* (Prince and Munic, 2008-2009) the ravages suffered by an addict in rehabilitation are reported. Although the range of substances that are portrayed is wide, opioids and pills prevail. Addiction in some cases is linked to personality disorders, as is the case of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015-2019). Instead, *The Knick* (Soderbergh et al., 2014-2015), *Nurse Jackie* (Mandabach et al., 2009-2015) and *Californication* (Duchovny et al., 2007-2014) present various uses of drugs: as a way to escape from problems, to alleviate personal crises or to improve performance at work. On the other hand, in *That 70s show* (Brazill et al., 1998-2006) recreational and group use of drugs is shown framed in the culture of the 1970s; no explicit allusion to consumption is made, but rather the viewer deduces it from the delirious conversations that the characters have and the presence of smoke.

In this way, the content of the series predominantly transmits two aspects in relation to drugs: the criminal nature of their sale and/or consumption and the psycho-

pathologization of substance use by specifically linking it to personality disorders or problematic consumption. The partiality of these statements ignores the various modalities that consumption can acquire -recreational use, abuse, intoxication, etc.-, as well as the relational character that it has, since it seems to focus the cause of addictive behavior on the qualities of the user's personality without considering the context in which it is immersed.

Based on what has been exposed, it is evident how the series translate elements of reality, attribute different meanings to them and convey social imaginaries that circulate globally. The fact that drugs constitute a central aspect in these narratives shows that the substance has become the paradigm of a contemporary symptom: the drive to consume. For this reason, series are a privileged way to translate the era, make it visible and decipherable, allowing us to problematize the characteristics of these times of hyperconsumption.

## OUR PROPOSAL IN THIS ISSUE

As an antecedent in this type of methodological approach, it is worth highlighting the book *Imaginarios de los trastornos mentales en la series* (Martinez Lucena and Cambra Badii, 2020), in which we set out to explore to what extent the portrayal of different mental disorders in current series meets or not a purpose of normalizing new behaviors and ideas. From the exploration of series of massive scope, we have analyzed the representation of mental disorders in the series and their encounters and disagreements with the diagnoses proposed from health sciences.





Returning to our proposal, this monograph aims to investigate the ways of representing addictions in the series, as well as the social and clinical changes that are represented. This initiative is part of our research projects “Making pain visible: visual narratives of the disease and transmedia storytelling” (Ministry of Education of Spain, RTI2018-098181-A-I00) and “(Bio) ethics and Human Rights in the approach of addictions. Mental health tools based on cinematographic narrative” (Secretary of Science and Technology, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina), and in the research work we carry out at University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia (Irene Cambra-Badii) and at University of Buenos Aires (María Paula Paragis). The study of these narratives in both projects unites our topic of greatest interest: supplementing theoretical knowledge through the interpellation produced by the series, understood as prisms of the social imaginary.

In the first article, Montserrat Vidal-Mestre (International University of Catalonia), Alfonso Freire Sánchez (Abat Oliba CEU University) and Carla Gracia-Mercadé (International University of Catalonia) make a historicization of the representation of drug use in cinema and in the series focusing especially on the character of the “villain”. For this, the narrative and the construction of the characters in *Peaky Blinders* (Knight, 2013-2022), one of the most successful series of recent years, are analyzed. In this case, alcohol consumption is not presented as something problematic, but is consumed in large quantities both alone and socially, regardless of gender or social class. On the other hand, the representation of cocaine does have a negative connotation and appears linked to violence and self-destructive behavior in the characters.

In the second article, Marta Lopera-Mármol and Manel Jiménez Morales (Pompeu Fabra University) analyze drug use in *coming-of-age* narratives, that is, series that address the transformation process of youth in the transition to adulthood. The research focuses on two paradigmatic series such as *Skins* (Elsley et al., 2013-2017) and *Euphoria* (Levinson, 2019-present), and points out that both emphasize the representation of mental disorders in adolescents, the multiple harmful effects of drugs and the difficulty of obtaining help from a network, although these representations appear more disembodied in *Euphoria*.

It is precisely this series that is also analyzed in the third article, by Jorge Martínez Lucena (Abat Oliba CEU University). With a psychoanalytic perspective and through the concepts of Massimo Recalcati, this article points out that the series is an excellent example of the current *emptiness clinic*, where individualism, lack of support and discomfort take control, although it proposes an optimistic approach to focus on a special Christmas episode where the protagonist can relate to her Narcotics Anonymous godfather and in turn to her own suffering and responsibility.

In the fourth article, Juan Pablo Duarte (National University of Córdoba, Argentina) addresses a paradigmatic series on drugs, *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008), which was selected by critics and academics from the television industry as the best series of 21st century television (BBC, 2021). The author carries out a psychoanalytic reading of his narrative, focusing on the way in which it portrays the central function that drugs assume in the dynamics of capitalist democracies, whose culture is commanded by objects of consumption.



To address other types of problematic consumption in the series, the last two articles focus on other types of drugs. Paula Mastandrea and María Paula Paragis (University of Buenos Aires, Argentina) analyze the representation of alcohol consumption in two series whose characters have the particularity of being university professors: *Merlí Sapere Aude* (Montánchez, 2019-2021) and *The Chair* (Peet and Wyman, 2021). In their research it is pointed out that the focus of problematic consumption in the educational field is usually linked to students and not to teachers. It is also highlighted that the treatment that is made of the theme deposits the causes of alcoholism in individual factors, without considering the socio-emotional and institutional variables at stake.

Finally, Joel Piqué Buisan and Irene Cambra Badii (Universitat de Vic - Universitat Central de Catalunya) analyze the series *Dopesick* (Strong et al., 2021) on the opioid crisis in the United States. In this case, the addiction is to a drug that began to be sold with medical prescriptions and then entered the illegal market. The article addresses the complex network of responsibilities and the social imaginary of the series, which focuses the responsibility on the pharmaceutical company and on the patients-addicts, but makes the responsibility of the health system and government controls invisible. In addition, a reflection on the legal framework of the United States and Spain is included, analyzing some factors that allow us to understand why both scenarios are different.

## FINAL WORDS

Throughout these pages we have specified that what is understood as addiction has not always had the same meaning, but rather it is

a socio-historical construction. Correlatively, the way in which movies and series represent drug use has been changing over time.

The proposal of this monograph lies in taking series as a privileged tool for the self-observation of society and its imaginaries on this subject, understanding that it allows reflection based on their narratives.

In this sense, the articles that make up the number allow a complex consideration of problematic substance use, based on interdisciplinary interweaving and diverse theoretical perspectives. This multidimensional approach to addiction presents an intrinsic solidarity with the representations we see on the screen, which interweave actors, realities, contexts and substances of the most varied nature, to offer us an approach to the multiple possible articulations between these elements and the configuration of a hypermodern subjectivity.

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