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‘and if Saturday Don’t Come Soon, I’m Gonna Lose My Mind’ – an Examination of How Drugs Impact the Lower and Working Classes and Why the Quest for Escapism in the Modern Age Drives Capitalism, Along With the Media’s Representation of It.

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**‘And if Saturday don’t come soon, I’m gonna lose  
my mind’.**

An examination of how drugs impact the lower and working classes and why the quest for escapism in the modern age drives capitalism, along with the media’s representation of it.

**Kacey Gow**

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## Abstract

Throughout human history, the use of natural substances to alter one's mind and body has been a consistent practice worldwide, suggesting that this behaviour is not new but rather an inherent part of the human experience. The Industrial Revolution marked a significant turning point in how technology and the economy functioned, with the mass production of pharmaceuticals made possible by these discoveries. This had a profound impact on the working class. As a result, individuals found themselves faced with a choice between chemically manufactured pills and traditional natural remedies, leading to a culture of consumption for the overworked man. This dissertation will explore the impact that drugs have on the lower and working-class communities, examining how the need to turn to drugs as a means of coping with daily struggles contributes to a capitalist system that many feel trapped within. Additionally, this discussion will consider the portrayal of drugs in art, particularly within film studies, highlighting how this medium serves to communicate the experiences and challenges faced by these social classes, which should inspire the audience to reflect on social dynamics.

## Acknowledgments

To everyone whose life has been affected by drugs, for better or worse.

## Introduction

Dating back to the pre-classical period (2,000 BCE – 1000 BCE), the evidence of humanity's consumption of natural substances to alter the mind and/or body's current state is vital in acknowledging that drug use is not a new phenomenon within civilisation. From the medicinal use of cannabis and opium in ancient Rome to the high consumption of alcohol within Mesopotamia as a staple beverage, being safer than water at the time, but also becoming an essential in religion as an offering to the gods (Whyte 2021). We can see, as a species, that there has been a long-standing interest in understanding the alternation of the human psyche. However, our mortal shell is not the only thing we have wished to alter; it is also the world around. Throughout history, the evolution of technology has progressed at a rapid pace. However, a true catalyst for the rapid advancement of technology in the modern age is the First Industrial Revolution, which began in the mid-18th century in Britain. This revolution fully catapulted the way society lived at the time into a new era, as it brought along the use of new basic materials, newer and improved energy sources such as the steam engine, improved machinery, changes in work system dynamics, and the list can go on for the improvements it brought along with it setting the foundations for how we currently live. Nevertheless, it was the lasting impacts of urbanisation that drew people from the countryside into these bustling cities, in the hopes of a brighter future and more opportunities for work. The solidification of class systems occurred due to the shift from land-based wealth to industrial capital, resulting in uneven power dynamics between the proletariat <sup>1</sup>and the bourgeoisie <sup>2</sup> that caused problems. This shift brought more complex working conditions to labourers, as the rise of capitalism<sup>3</sup> had begun, and there was nothing they could do to stop

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<sup>1</sup> The working class

<sup>2</sup> The middle/capitalist class

<sup>3</sup> An economic system where a country survives of private ownership of its goods.

this growth that was mutating. So, the working man was tired, now pushed to work 14-16 hours a day in the factories with unsafe working conditions, whilst losing their autonomy by becoming nameless cogs in the machine (Britannica 2024). They had to find a way to have fun, and which industry was significantly impacted by the decade? Medicine. With the rise in anaesthetics, specifically Nitrous Oxide<sup>4</sup>, booming as a numbing agent for women going through childbirth, but also as an overall pain reliever, which was needed in such a time of great hurt, and the rise in alcohol consumption also occurring due to its mass production meaning lower costs, and the fast paced high stress life these workers were living they needed to numb out somehow (Wikipedia Contributors 2019). Excessive drug consumption is also prevalent in the 21st century, with the continued attempt to escape from one's own body and mind by taking opioids, hallucinogens, tranquillisers, etc.

My desire is to explore how the proletariat has historically turned to drugs as a means of finding solace amidst the relentless pressures of capitalism. This investigation will delve into the cyclical nature of addiction, where individuals, in seeking respite from their overwhelming circumstances, inadvertently feed into the very system that exploits their vulnerabilities. By purchasing substances to numb their pain, they contribute to the capitalist machine that perpetuates their struggles, creating a paradoxical dependence on both the drugs and the economic forces that produce them. I will focus specifically on two regions: Scotland in the United Kingdom and New York in the United States. Both prominent examples within superpower nations are where the impact of drug use is acutely felt. In these areas, large segments of the population are intimately familiar with the consequences of addiction, and I will examine how various films set in these regions portray the realities of drug use. To ground my analysis, I will draw on the theoretical frameworks of significant thinkers such as

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<sup>4</sup> Laughing gas.

Walter Benjamin, whose notions of mechanical reproduction can illuminate how mass media representations shape public perception of drug culture.

Additionally, I will engage with Karl Marx's and Marxist theorist's critiques of capitalism to understand how economic systems contribute to the disenfranchisement that leads individuals to seek escape through substance use. Lastly, Michael Foucault's concepts of biopolitics will provide insight into how societal norms and government policies regulate bodies and behaviours surrounding drug consumption, contributing to a complex relationship between individual agency and state control. Through this multifaceted examination, I aim to uncover the intricate interplay between capitalism, drug use, and societal responses in these two critical settings.

## Chapter 1: Initial use

*“I can't understand why people believe in medicine and don't believe in art, without questioning either”*

– Damien Hirst

As children, when we fell ill, our parents would offer us remedies like the unmistakable flavours of Calpol and Amoxicillin<sup>5</sup>, which eased the aches and pains of our youthful bodies. Chemists served as the one-stop shop for all our medical needs, providing cures for nearly every ailment. However, as we grow up, the sources of our discomfort become harder to identify. The early nights of restful sleep before school have given way to multiple late nights filled with exhausting back shifts. Unsocial hours<sup>6</sup> are becoming the new norm, and we can see our communities starting to crumble under the pressure, draining the little joy we manage to hold on to from our souls. As we return from work to houses that consume our income, especially since getting a foot on the property ladder is more complicated than ever, statistics reveal the troubling situation. In 2023, the average cost of owning a home was 5.2 times the average salary (£150,000), compared to 3.8 times (£55,000) in 2003/04 (Stanton, 2024). Unfortunately, the minimum wage has not kept pace with these changes, widening the gap for young homeowners who are in the greatest need of affordable housing.

Thus, as we struggle to continue living within these four walls, poverty is rampant. In Scotland, 20% of working-age adults live in relative poverty (Scottish Government 2024). This leads us to question what we can do to numb the pain of this cycle. Unfortunately, some may turn to the age-old illegal chemist. Drug dealers, if you will. Even before adulthood's harsh realities began to surface, early adolescent drug use was already evident in Scotland; in 2018, 6% of 13-year-olds and 21% of 15-year-olds reported having tried drugs (Scottish Government 2019), a figure that may be higher depending on the demographics and areas surveyed, because one statistic does not speak for a whole country's problem, however these numbers are already worrying. Various reasons drive childhood drug use, but a significant link exists between socioeconomic status and these experiences. The lower-class lifestyle

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<sup>5</sup> The banana flavoured medicine

<sup>6</sup> Hours that fall outside the typical 9-5

impacts not only physical health, which is exacerbated by food poverty and poor housing, but also takes a toll on mental well-being, fostering insecurity, stress, and a profound sense of loneliness as worries about where the next meal will come from loom overhead. These stories are often underrepresented in the media, yet they evoke a deep sense of concern and urgency that needs to be shared more than ever.

It has been over twenty years since the United Kingdom experienced a sustained decrease in poverty (JRF 2024), which is unacceptable. Considering the vast wealth created worldwide through inheritance and monopoly power, it is surprising that so many people still lack access to it. However, as the saying goes, "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer"<sup>7</sup>. This is where we must turn to the arts for help. A realm of authentic expression and storytelling that takes personal experiences and transforms them into mediums for understanding one another, not for greed, but for truthful understanding. Film serves as an excellent medium of communication. Our access to films often provides the first glimpse we get of the world beyond our own, from old blockbuster movie rental shops to modern streaming services and pirated videos. Everyone loves to observe the lives of others and step into their shoes, even if just for an hour. This shared experience can foster empathy and a sense of unity among diverse audiences.

But why is film a viable art form? Walter Benjamin's essay, *'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'*, offers insights into the reproducibility of artworks and their role in the political sphere. Benjamin argues that traditional pieces, which hold 'cult' value, such as religious or ceremonial artworks, possess an 'aura' based on their originality and the unique place they hold in time and space. This 'aura' diminishes when art is mass-produced through photography, film, prints, and other means of reproduction (Benjamin

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<sup>7</sup> Attributed to Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 1940. *In a Defence of Poetry*.

1935). This shift creates a form of art aimed at the masses, enhancing accessibility for the proletariat and allowing art to influence politics, depict current events, and facilitate discussions beyond the realm of literature. We can see in this line from (Benjamin 1935, 13) “the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations”, this initially can be seen as a sheer mockery in the attempt to please the masses but the power reachability has in the ability to bridge the class divide, especially for those in the working class who struggle with language and reading is crucial, because of their lack of education often due to being pushed into more labouring positions, where the arts were once only pushed to the wealthier members of society. Compared to literature, classical paintings, or abstract sculptures, films are a language that requires no prior learning. One can enjoy or understand the plot of a film solely in the moment of viewing, as the narrative unfolds through thought-provoking imagery, sound, dialogue, and lighting. Nothing conveys a story more simply than a film, making it the most understandable and palatable of the arts. However, this accessibility also allows large companies to generate billions in revenue from Hollywood studios, where stories often fail to accurately represent the ordinary working class. When they do, those portrayals can be grim and unenjoyable, not showing the rawness of a lived experience but the over-dramatized life they think will sell best. Thankfully, some stories have been told, and I aim to contribute to this ongoing conversation about how the language of film, however much 'aura' it may lack, is the purest form of representation the working class has within art.

## Chapter 2: Mis(use)



Figure 1: Welsh, Brain, dir. 2019. *Beats*. Rosetta Productions.

In 1994, the British government introduced the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill, an important piece of legislation that not only refined existing laws but also hugely impacted the illegal rave scenes by implementing firm penalties on those engaging in 'anti-social behaviour. This was related to the apparent public safety issues these events posed to the public, such as trespassing, littering, and public drug use, which this legislation now allowed the police to shut down. Additionally, if music was played at these events that contained 'repetitive beats' (Editor 2019), it was also addressed. However, the societal impact this legislation had on the British population was far more profound than the government had anticipated. Whilst the decision of the bill was being determined, there were three pivotal protests in London within the year, this being May 1st, which had around 20,000 individuals in attendance, July 25th, with an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 and the third on the 9th of October, which was argued to be the biggest by police, with statistics ranging between 20,000 – 100,000, where a riot broke out in the evening between protesters and police because of the attempted use of two sound systems in Hyde park. This act of defiance was a striking testament to the community spirit and resilience of the people, who did not want this valuable part of their community to be scrutinised and criminalised.

We can look to the philosopher Karl Marx for his views on protest to understand why this bill may have more bias than it initially appears. Marx claims that protest is vital in the overthrow of a capitalist society, because the workers will realise that they “You have nothing to lose but your chains”<sup>8</sup> which comes from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ‘*The Communist Manifesto*’ and that through action of protest is the closest we may get to change. If we examine this in the context of illegal raving, those who attend typically come from working-class communities, where they gather for a night of fun and enjoy the hypnotic

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<sup>8</sup> ““Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains!” is a popularisation of the last three sentences and is not found in any official translation. Since this English translation was approved by Engels, we have kept the original intact.’ (Marx 1848)

energy, forming a sense of community, friendships, and a place to escape the worries of everyday life. However, this very bill is putting a community in danger of disappearing and/or facing criminal charges. Tracing the roots of raving back to the underground warehouses of the 1980s reveals a haven for marginalised workers navigating harsh economic realities (British Culture Archive 2017). However, this once untamed scene has now, in the current time, fallen into the hands of commercial interests, echoing the capitalist appropriation of every vibrant subculture that has once emerged. What was once spontaneous and authentic has been transformed into trends like 'rave fashion', a mismatched ensemble of outfits crafted for nights of unbridled joy, now mocked by fashion houses, blurring the boundaries between authenticity and commodification. Demonstrating how, if we do not keep fighting for a sense of uniqueness and freedom in the world, we can easily become shells of ourselves, and our forms of escapism within a capitalist system will become a commodity they can sell to those who want to impersonate the working class for their own pleasure. Just like the culture of nightlife, which was created by the proletariat as a rebellion from the workday, the night once served as a restorative period for workers, a time to rejuvenate before facing the daily grind and functioning as efficient cogs in the relentless factory machine. However, when they venture into the exhilarating realms of nightlife and indulge in substances that alter their behaviour, they partake in their own profound act of rebellion, fundamentally knowingly or unknowing redefining the essence of existence during those captivating hours of darkness, becoming our own modern form of fighting against the system, even if it is just a cycle of excruciating hangovers on Monday mornings making our output mediocre. This is what Laurent de Sutter speaks of in his 2017 book *'Narcocapitalism'*, in conversation with Marx's views on the concept of 'extra time', in which “sleep is the honest man's rest, and the torment of those whose existence yields to impropriety, of whatever kind” (Sutter 2017, 47), so they try and limit the amount of rest time workers have which is why

nightlife is such a rebellion from the working class, because they are using this time in ways of forming community and enjoying life instead of succumbing to how the bourgeoisie want us to be.

The 2019 black and white film *'Beats'* is a perfect depiction of the rave scene within youth culture and a form of defiance, specifically in Scotland, with this story focusing on two teenage boys<sup>9</sup> from Livingston during the 1990s. The overarching plot for the boys was to attend an illegal rave that was being hosted just as the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill was coming into effect. The film does an exceptional job of capturing the essence of Scottish teenage culture, immersing viewers in the vibrant interplay of dialogue rich with the Scots dialect. This authenticity resonates deeply, reflecting the nuanced complexities surrounding drug use and the genuine struggles faced by youth. It shatters the stereotype of the 'junkie', illustrating that addiction and the pursuit of numbness can affect anyone, from the most unsuspecting individuals to those perceived as innocent bystanders, perhaps even your neighbour or yourself. Moreover, *'Beats'* illustrates that the yearning for escapism does not exclusively emerge in the burdensome years of adulthood. Instead, it often germinates long before, manifesting in the lives of young people who seek solace from their overwhelming circumstances. Specifically in the catalyst scene within the middle of the movie when the best friends make it to the rave, the overwhelming joy and peace they gain from the high of the drug but also the environment that fostered friendship and community is powerful in displaying why the everyday person needs these areas of expression and fun, because they create a buzz that cannot be replicated within our hearts. The film weaves a narrative that is both heartbreakingly relatable and incisive, urging viewers to reflect on the social structures and personal histories that shape our understanding of drugs, youth, and the human experience (Welsh 2019), because, at the end of the day, if we do not acknowledge the brutal

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<sup>9</sup> Johnno and Spanner

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truths of spectrums of youth, nothing will ever change. However, if these spaces long to exist and we are forced to use drugs within more unsafe spaces, the consequences may be dire.

## Chapter 3: Tolerance



Figure 2: Aronofsky, Darren, dir. 2000. *Requiem for a Dream*. Artisan Entertainment.

Just one wont will not hurt. The rate at which our bodies adapt to substances varies significantly from person to person, resulting in a complex dialogue between biology and personal 'choice'. As we become increasingly accustomed to the soothing waves of ease and tranquillity that drugs provide, resisting their pull transforms into a difficult challenge. Our routines become a cycle of working, sleeping, and mindlessly repeating, which paints a monotonous picture of daily life that often leaves us feeling drained and unfulfilled. In this unrelenting grind, it is easy to become stuck, caught in a capitalist society that prioritises productivity over our well-being. The temptation to escape intensifies as we seek solace from the mounting pressures of our jobs, relationships, and societal expectations, prompting us to turn to self-medication. Each indulgence pulls us deeper into a cycle of consumption, where every experience only heightens our cravings, driven by an insatiable desire for more. The euphoria of our initial high fades into a distant memory, an elusive ideal that we endlessly pursue, only to be met with disappointment and a profound sense of unfulfillment in its aftermath. Leaving us unsure what to do. So, we continue to take, and take, and take.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of a global health crisis, many individuals continue to overlook the statistics that lay bare the severity of the situation. Take Scotland, for instance, which has consistently had the highest rate of drug-related deaths in Europe, recording an alarming 1,017 fatalities in 2024 alone (Scotland 2024), equating to nearly three lives lost each day. This reality reveals a sobering truth: far too many people choose to ignore the implications of addiction and the fate that often accompanies it. The allure of taking copious amounts of legal or illegal drugs can lead many down a treacherous path, usually closing their eyes to the harsh consequences that may be just around the corner. As individuals build a higher tolerance to drugs, the threshold for safety blurs, and the risks escalate, pushing them dangerously closer to a point of no return. However, the crisis is not confined to Scotland; it is felt worldwide. The United States, grappling fiercely with its own

opioid epidemic<sup>10</sup>, records staggering numbers of drug-related fatalities each year. The parallels between these two nations are hauntingly intertwined, spanning roughly 3,300 miles of ocean and culture, yet reflecting a shared epidemic that transcends geographic and demographic boundaries. This widespread struggle underscores the humanity that binds all of us in the face of addiction and despair. Addiction knows no boundaries or barriers; it can happen to anyone, regardless of background or circumstance. However, the reasons we initially begin taking drugs are often deeply rooted in systemic and social issues such as marginalisation, economic hardship, and mental health struggles (Team 2024). This multifaceted crisis calls for a collective acknowledgement and response that goes beyond mere statistics, encouraging empathy, understanding, and action to address the underlying factors contributing to this tragedy.

In examining the 2000s film *'Requiem for a Dream'*, we can see how the narrative follows four characters in Coney Island, New York, as they descend into tragic circumstances driven by their addictions. Among them, the storyline of Sara, the widowed mother, is remarkably impactful and distressing to dissect. Her struggle is depicted through her dependence on weight-loss medication, fuelled by an obsession with the prospect of appearing on a television game show. This desire to achieve fame represents her hope for a transformative escape from her monotone and draining daily life. However, instead of this fame and glory, all she gets is psychosis. As she takes an increasing amount of her amphetamines<sup>11</sup> to try to lose weight quickly, the reality around her begins to falter. The crucial scene that displays her addiction features her in her famous red dress, which she once wished to fit back into, but now hangs loosely over her frail body. She sits in her armchair, hallucinating herself into the TV show, but then people begin to appear around her in her own

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<sup>10</sup> Such as Fentanyl.

<sup>11</sup> Stimulants (uppers)

living room, where the fuzzy-looking host and audience mock her. Then she is surrounded by the studio crew, and the visuals start to become clearer. The line between fantasy and fiction becomes increasingly complex for her to distinguish. So, she runs out of her house, travelling to the studios building, begging to know when she will have her time on the show, and this is when the police are called, as the workers can tell that she was not okay, showing the contrast between her alternative reality and the real-world consequences of psychosis and how she truly believed her delusions because of the drug's effects. Examining how external factors influence our lives, Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, which can be defined as the regulation and management of the global population through the combination of the political and biological spheres, whilst Foucault says in *'The History of Sexuality, volume 1'* "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault 1978, 140) offers an insightful framework for analysing how power influences not only our daily lives but also our physical bodies. Within this framework, both the state and various institutions implement mechanisms to exercise control over populations, thereby shaping societal norms related to health, wellness, and productivity. A significant instance of this biopolitical control is evident in the promotion of diet pills, which serve as more than mere weight-loss aids. They are marketed as essential elements of a lifestyle aligned with societal expectations of acceptability and desirability. This approach reflects a broader ideology that emphasises conformity and normalisation, ultimately affecting individual perceptions of health and body image and how pharmaceutical companies have such power over the population, being the distributor to these small ticking time bomb, along with how the continued selling of drugs to feed addiction is itself creating a never ending repetition of money back into the system causing the usage. The practices surrounding diet pills exemplify the complex interplay between power, self-regulation, and the commercialisation of personal responsibility today. Nevertheless, we can also play into the

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use and legislation of alcohol and its numbing qualities that many enjoy and overuse as a release. Stressed from the day, paying to forget at night creates a knock-on effect that keeps them stuck on a tightrope, just close enough to the edge that they are scared and will not move out of fear.

## Chapter 4: Dependence



Figure 3: Scorsese, Martin, dir. 2013. *The Wolf of Wallstreet*. Paramount Pictures.

In the workplace, individuals often face the choice between adapting to their environment or risking struggling to thrive in their roles. However, the dynamics shift dramatically when we consider the behaviours of different socioeconomic groups. For instance, when a wealthy broker's workday is fuelled by excessive cocaine use, the implications are viewed through a different lens compared to when workers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds engage in similar behaviours. The societal perceptions of substance use are starkly contrasting based on class. An affluent individual may be perceived as a high-functioning professional, whereas a working-class man may face stigma and judgment for the same drug usage. This disparity underscores the complex relationship between socioeconomic status and substance use. For many lower-class workers in physically demanding jobs, the relentless nature of their work can have a significant impact on both their physical and mental health. The stress and exhaustion often lead to increased vulnerability to substance use problems as a coping mechanism. Alarmingly, studies indicate that approximately one-third of employees report either using drugs or witnessing substance use during working hours (Team 2025). This issue is particularly pronounced in industries such as construction and mining, where the pressures of the job are intense, and the work culture may inadvertently normalise substance use to cope with the demands of the job. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effectively addressing workplace substance use. By recognising the unique challenges faced by different groups, we can foster a more supportive environment that prioritises well-being and encourages healthier coping strategies for the future, aiming to reduce the likelihood of working-class individuals turning to substances.

The 2013 film *'The Wolf of Wall Street'* depicts the journey of climbing the corporate ladder and explores the subsequent lifestyle, which includes the thrill of parties and extravagant living. However, it also sheds light on the darker aspects of drug use and abuse among the affluent. Based on the life of American stockbroker Jordan Belfort, the movie

chronicles his rise from an entry-level position on Wall Street to establishing his own firm. It ultimately portrays how his involvement in rampant corruption and fraud led to his downfall as he is prosecuted for his fraudulent activities within his own firm. A noticeable trend can be found among brokers in New York City, who increasingly rely on prescription medications such as Adderall and Vyvanse to power through their demanding 60–80-hour work weeks, or turn to more illicit substances to cope with the intense pressure they face. This self-created system operates on the principle of 'no pain, no gain'. Driven by the global market, brokers often stay up late and rise early, motivated by the relentless competition to attract affluent clients and boost revenue. As the epicentre of finance in the United States, New York City faces significant repercussions when the stock market falters, resulting in detrimental effects on the economy. This means that these brokers live on the line, not only for their own survival but also for the entire economy, as they help make or break the flow of capital. However, there is irony to be found in this. When individuals who control significant capital resort to enhancements through the usage of legal or illegal substances, they are often not only accepted but also celebrated for their innovative efforts and hard work. Society tends to applaud their resilience and resourcefulness in navigating harsh working conditions.

In contrast, those who lack wealth, ranging from the economically disadvantaged to the homeless and working-class individuals who barely meet their basic needs, are subjected to harsh judgment. These individuals, often perceived as unproductive members of society, struggle daily to make ends meet. This perception overlooks the complex realities they face and fails to recognise that many of them are victims of an economic system that prioritises profit over people. While the wealthy receive praise for their strategies, the struggles of those on the margins are often dismissed, despite their invaluable contributions to the community in terms of labour and resilience. Without adequate support, resources, or understanding from society, these individuals find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, making their path to a

better life increasingly difficult. As capitalism needs poverty to thrive, if everything were equalised and there were not such significant gaps between social classes, especially going up to the wealthiest. Capitalism as we know it would not be able to continue, as we would not accept the life we have now, being paid minimum wage for hard labour, as there are currently people on this planet who have billions in their pockets (for perspective, if you spent \$1000 a day, it would take in estimate 2740 years to spend 1 billion dollars). However, the working class are greedy for wanting fair pay. So, we continue to stay in our place as everyday workers, while Scotland's 21 and over wage is £12.21 an hour<sup>12</sup>, these New York brokers are averaging \$41.51 an hour<sup>13</sup>(ERI Economic Research Institute, 2026). The film presents a compelling conversation between art and the wealthy, drawing on Benjamin's beliefs about mechanical reproduction.

This film serves as an anchor between the high-class glamorisation of drug usage and the real-life reality of the working class. Taking a scene, such as when Belfort crashes his expensive Lamborghini because he is so high on Quaaludes (Scorsese 2013), this reckless behaviour, often exhibited by those who can afford it, highlights the differences between classes and his subsequent fall from grace throughout the film. His manic driving and damaging everything in his path, along with the car itself, are representative of the effects drug usage has on one's personal life if it gets 'out of control'. In the quest for release, humans take to escape, but there are always consequences, whether social, financial, or physical. They catch up and leave damage just as Belfort does to his own prize possessions. So, when analysing this glamorising film, we can understand that Scorsese also acknowledged the impact that high stake life has because when you are so high, you have nowhere to go but down and that's where Belfort ends the movie, being charged for his

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<sup>12</sup> Currently of January 2026

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fraudulent ways. But when someone is already heard of means, they can only go up but often that is also in illegal means, with trespassing, theft, burglary or even worse just to get their happiness.

## Chapter 5: Addiction



Figure 4: Boyle, Danny, dir. 1996. *Trainspotting*. PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.

"Choose life". This powerful slogan gained notoriety during the 1980s as a prominent anti-drug slogan, aiming to encourage individuals struggling with addiction to embrace healthier, more fulfilling lifestyles. This phrase also serves as the iconic opening line of the critically acclaimed 1996 film *'Trainspotting'*. This film provided a stark and moving depiction of the horrors people faced in Scotland during the rise of the heroin epidemic. *'Trainspotting'* depicts the deeply connected relationship of friendship, poverty, addiction and the quest for personal identity in such a stagnant period faced by those suffering. The film highlights the broader societal crisis that arose during the 80s, and this was because of the quick uptake in heroine that was being brought into Scotland from countries such as Afghanistan and Iran as these opium disturbers got cracked down on at the end of the 70s leading to new paths having to formed for distribution, and one of these where Scotland, and this was the perfect breeding ground for a culture of disaster with Scotland already facing high notes of poverty and unemployable along with social desperation we become glued to this highly potent drug, and this is what the film represents with no glamorisation or infatuation but a pure, raw depiction of Scotland's disease (News Desk, 2025)

Tragically, looking back to my previous chapter we can reflect again on Scotland being declared a drug death capital of Europe highlighting not only the past effects drugs had on the country going back to the 80s, but also the knock-on effects it has had on generations to follow. This is the country's cry for help when we cannot escape a life of heartache. However, why is Scotland so susceptible to drug consumption compared to other nations? We can look to the so-called 'Scotland' or 'Glasgow effect' for the believed notions on why, as a country, we cannot stop. This phenomenon suggests that there is no one intrinsic reason why Scotland is so addicted compared to areas facing equal deprivation, such as Manchester. Even with our rates of poverty, we are pushing far under our life expectancy, with one in four men in Scotland not making it past their 65th birthday (Ash 2014). However, labelling this a

phenomenon is lacklustre and intrinsically inactive as a society in finding a solution to this inherent problem. As we know, we need to do better for those facing poverty, driving them deeper into isolation and shame instead of acceptance and change. Shame is predominantly what stops individuals from seeking help. As cities across Scotland grapple with the far-reaching consequences of increasing addiction rates, rising homelessness, and untreated mental health conditions, the need for meaningful dialogue and practical solutions becomes paramount. Addressing these urgent needs requires a proactive approach that fosters a renewed sense of hope and resilience among communities, rather than dismissing the Scotland effect as a mere phenomenon. However, as humans, we are accustomed to what is already present in the world as we attempt to ground ourselves within its confines.

Investigating the philosopher Fredric Jameson and his concept of cognitive mapping which is an aesthetic and political attempt to position oneself in the world driven by capitalist consumption and production, so we can try and understand why we want to orient ourselves within the world as we live through late-stage capitalism, which can be done through the usage of film as a marker of understanding, as they mediate our attempt to understand our own place within society, as a means of class awareness. This Marxist theory uses film because of its innate value of dialogue as a stepping stone to orient ourselves in a civilization running so swiftly that we often do not fully understand until the trend or fad is over, "we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience" (Fredric 1990), he means by this that experience is limited, one cannot truly experience something authentic in this age because of the structural past it already holds within the world. This is a concept too vast to be grasped by a single individual. So, the use of art can help place our own 'unique' experiences into digestible, understandable visual

works, which 'trainspotting' is achieved by showing Edinburgh in this element of space and time, making it easier for those to understand the true travesty that was occurring.

So, when we examine scenes such as Renton's overdose, we can acknowledge the harrowing truth of what can happen and does happen to many people with an addiction. As his body lies in the middle of the road, we can see this visual as an important understanding of the average person's view of drug users. Whilst they go untouched and unhealed, like a statue everybody fears to touch, or help is the exact reason people become stuck in this life, as we are becoming more individualistic, because capitalism and individualism were sold to us with the idea of freedom being what we would gain as we become the controllers of our own lives. However, when our stability falters and we begin to struggle, we often retreat to our core values as a society and become isolated. Which Renton then does at the end of the film, stealing all the drug money he and his friends had made and escaped, leaving them to fend for themselves. Whether how they got the money was morally good or bad does not matter for this argument but Renton become selfish when money was factored into living, not only because of his addiction making him think less about others but also because if we reflect on this quoter from Marx "Money is the alienated essence of man's work and existence; this essence dominates him and he worships it" (Marx 1844), we see can see the fundamental part money plays in the life of man. As we work every day to make this compound called money, we then waste our actual existence in the world because we are so tied into the regime of capitalism, where the pursuit of profit is everything. So, however evil Renton's actions may be, he did what every billionaire in the world is praised for, however we can take some pride in the knowledge he left Spud<sup>14</sup> some of the money before he left, but we can see how this was not helpful in spuds recovery but only helped fuel his addiction further.

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<sup>14</sup> A good friend.

## Chapter 6: Relapse



Figure 5: Boyle, Danny, dir. 2017. *T2 Trainspotting*. Sony Pictures Motion Picture Group.

However, what happens when we manage to break free from the cycle of addiction? This theme is evident in the ending of the first *'Trainspotting'* film, where Renton, having stolen the drug money, makes a desperate attempt to escape. In the sequel, *'T2 Trainspotting,'* set two decades later, we find Renton, now clean from drugs, suffering a heart attack in Amsterdam, where he is living. Faced with redundancy at work and the end of his relationship, he views these setbacks as a reason to take a nostalgic trip back to Edinburgh and confront his past. A pivotal scene highlights Renton's transformation when he visits Spud in his 13th-floor flat. Renton must break down the door to save Spud, who is attempting suicide after falling back into heroin use following his divorce. Spud is furious with Renton for saving his life, feeling trapped in his inability to get his act together and stay clean. However, Renton insists he can help Spud overcome his addiction, portraying that his life is so perfect in Amsterdam that he could turn Spud into someone new. However, Renton is merely putting on a façade of success in front of his friends, despite his life crumbling beneath the surface. While he presents himself as a model of recovery, the truth is he is feeling unfulfilled. Before losing his job, he was successful in real estate, dressed in professional clothes that highly contrast with his drug-addicted past. However, this seemingly perfect life has turned into a monotonous routine that leaves him bored. So, were his reasons for coming home really rooted in nostalgia? It feels like an unconscious pull back to where it all began, to the intensity of his past life, which, though unhealthy and unsafe, offers a form of escapism in a painful world. Now, the sober world he has tasted seems bitter to him, and he struggles to see the appeal in such a dull, passive existence (Boyle 2017).

He chose life yet found himself grappling with the complexities of existence. Addiction is not merely a struggle. It is a complex narrative filled with twists and turns that can be overwhelming to navigate. The road to recovery is often filled with obstacles, where the prospect of relapse looms overhead, casting a shadow over the journey towards healing.

For many whose lives have long been dominated by substance use, redefining their self-image can feel like an unimaginable challenge. This struggle does not exist in isolation. It is interwoven with society's perceptions that can be equally crippling. Those labelled as 'down and out' face a stigma that can halt their recovery, as society often views them through a narrow lens that emphasises their past mistakes rather than their potential for change. This limited viewpoint reinforces a destructive narrative that suggests they are fated to remain trapped in a cycle of addiction.

Furthermore, the statistics surrounding recovery are sobering. Research indicates that approximately 40-60% of individuals recovering from substance use disorders experience relapse (Kitzinger et al. 2023). However, it is crucial to recognise that this statistic does not indicate failure. Instead, it highlights the reality of trying to transform one's life in an environment that may not always be supportive or understanding. Each step taken toward recovery is a testament to resilience and determination, a reflection of a person's desire to reclaim and own their life despite the daunting challenges that lie ahead. Ultimately, the journey toward recovery is not only about personal transformation, but it is also about seeking a place at the table of society's acceptance and support.

Reflecting on Michel Foucault's concept of bio politics, we can see a significant portrayal of the government's approach to addiction and its subsequent consequences. Drug policies often perpetuate a cycle of struggle rather than fostering rehabilitation. A significant issue lies in the lack of continuous care for vulnerable individuals, particularly among ex-prisoners and individuals emerging from rehabilitation programs. These groups are at a remarkably high risk of relapse due to the insufficient support systems that exist, so it is thought that we are throwing these people back into the deep end of attempted sobriety. Once released, ex-prisoners frequently face stigmatisation, labelled as criminals and deviants, which complicates their reintegration into society (Kelly n.d.). The crucial support that is

often overlooked for their recovery is instead shunned by their communities, rather than being supported. Moreover, we must consider the circumstances leading up to incarceration. Many who struggle with substance use disorders find themselves imprisoned because they turn out homeless or selling these drugs to survive, burdening the prison system with those who are primarily harmless in the grand scheme. This reality draws a heavy contrast to how individuals involved in grave misconduct may escape accountability simply because they possess the financial means to silence their actions or manipulate the system. In this structure, the societal failure to address addiction comprehensively reveals a troubling prioritisation of correctional measures over genuine care and rehabilitation, perpetuating a damaging cycle that affects individuals and communities alike. Alternatively, we can explore the practices of large pharmaceutical companies to gain insight into their relentless pursuit of profit within the healthcare sector. These companies play a crucial role as distributors of essential medications that help maintain our health and well-being. However, this vital function also positions them as significant players in the capitalist framework, particularly in the United States, which is notorious for having the highest medicine prices globally. The pharmaceutical industry is characterised by extensive lobbying efforts aimed at influencing legislation and regulating policies to protect its interests. This lobbying often prioritises profit over patient accessibility which we can see in areas such as diabetes with the price of insulin rising to keep us with the mass consumption due to the trend of weight loss use with Ozempic, making those who need this to survive to fall victim to Americas greed for money, raising concerns about the ethical implications of prioritising financial gain in a sector that directly impacts human health. Understanding this complex relationship between profit motives, healthcare accessibility, and regulatory practices is essential for a nuanced discussion on the state of healthcare in America and the role of big pharma in shaping it. However, it is important to recognise that the situation cannot be solely attributed to

America; the European Union has also played a significant role in these developments. Their complicity is evident in the way they define pharmaceutical property rights, which often prioritise corporate interests over the needs of public health. Additionally, the United Kingdom's active lobbying for new drug treatments further complicates matters, as it often promotes access to medications that may not align with the best interests of all countries involved. Together, these factors contribute to a challenging environment where the responsibilities and consequences of pharmaceutical policies are shared across multiple entities (Barwell 2025).

## Conclusion

So where does this leave us? After examining these films and understanding the nuanced ways they depict their stories, we find ourselves grappling with the realisation that we are stuck in this relentless cycle of consumption. As we do not find these narratives showing us a scene of triumph out of the hole we are stuck in, but show the harsh realities faced by these characters that mirror many individuals own lives and the aftermath of substance use.

However, we can use this as a source of hope for change. We have society understand more into why the lower and working class fall into pits of addiction because of financial, social and structural issues that do not support them fully, and art understands this story by highlighting the unacknowledged and less fortunate into the spotlight, shining hope on the belief that we can change the ending of these stories in real life because drug use is not new, and will stop no time soon. However, the effects it has on society of people losing their lives literally or the metaphoric life-changing events that come with addiction is not a way to live, and this being an effect of a dull life fuelled by working until you can no longer afford to live is not how life was intended, but that is a structural fault.

For instance, the film *'Beats'* resonates with the nostalgic undertones of the experience of many individuals from lower and working-class backgrounds when they first use substances. It not in a grim back alley already waiting for the next high, but a completely unknown feeling of anticipation often with friends for a night of liberating fun and freedom, and somewhere in that warmth is a beauty of escapism that can be safe and freeing to a mundane life allowing us to escape our burdens if only for a night, in a shared experience captivated by camaraderie and solace.

However, this is where we must know that addiction is not only for a night. Some may be able to take recreationally for the enjoyment, knowing they must face realities truth soon, but others do not have that luxury, and that is the tight line one faces every time they take substances. As the darker side of this coin is stories such as *'Requiem for a Dream'* and the *'Trainspotting'* films which can be seen as cautionary tale of the intoxicating life the yearn for escapism can have over the body and mind especially for the less fortunate as we turn our heads to the inequalities between those who have the financials to live such lavish life styles such as *'The Wolf of Wall Street'*, which gives insight into the affluent lifestyles that can be equally filled with addiction but have a undertone of glamorisation because money talks, and when you have the means to pay for substance to take that means judgment is less pronounced or even applauded.

So, with that, take this as not a plea against drugs, as this will never be a standpoint I align with, but rather as a call for acknowledgement and understanding, because this is how things change - because nothing changes if nothing changes.

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