

Culture--Hollywood

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

Culture -
(Hollywood)

Hollywood again makes drug use seem hip, sexy

By Michael Medved

When today's parents complain about Hollywood's influence on their kids, they usually focus on the excesses of violence, or the portrayal of irresponsible sex, or even the encouragement of rudeness and foul language. Unfortunately, they seldom note the most disturbing, destructive — and altogether irrational — movie trend of the past several months: the consistent glorification of illegal drugs.

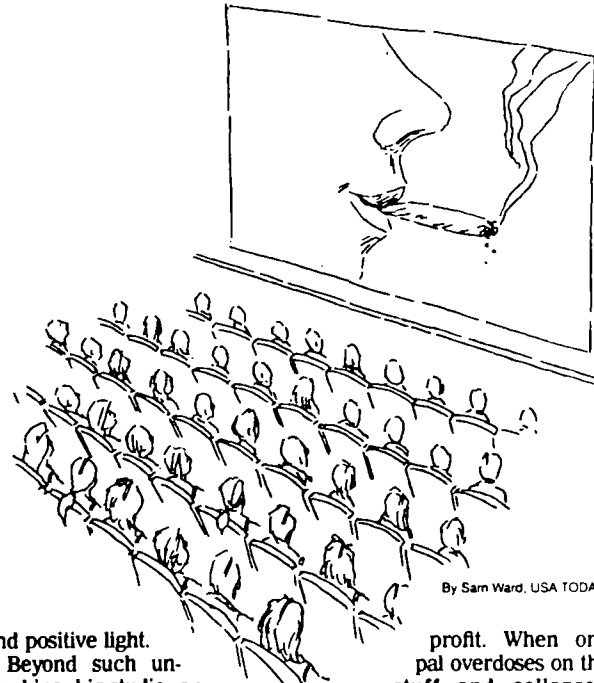
Consider, for example, the critically acclaimed new film *American Beauty*. Most of the controversy surrounding this very dark comedy centers on the vivid, lustful fantasies of its central character (Kevin Spacey), a suburban husband and father who has become obsessed with the flirtatious best friend of his teen-age daughter. Even more damaging messages, however, involve the boy next door — a handsome, charismatic, profoundly sensitive high school drug dealer (Wes Bentley), who represents the film's single most sympathetic character. In fact, when this poetic paragon provides pot for his troubled middle-age neighbor, the protagonist undergoes a rapid change for the better, developing new depth, confidence, wisdom and even serenity.

American Beauty hardly

stands alone in showing the allegedly liberating impact of marijuana and other drugs.

In the generally wholesome, PG-rated high school comedy *Never Been Kissed*, the anxious, uptight main character (Drew Barrymore) cuts loose for the first time, dancing seductively and achieving new popularity, under the influence of hashish brownies. Similar baked goods play a similar role in *Dick*, a satirical look at the Nixon White House. President Nixon (played by Dan Hedaya) enjoys his only moments of charm and pleasure after the movie's two ditz, 15-year-old heroines provide him with cookies laced with marijuana. Soviet Chairman Leonid Brezhnev, conveniently visiting the White House, also enjoys this mood-altering snack and begins laughing and backslapping with the American president, as pot makes its unique contribution to world peace.

Marijuana also plays a significant role in Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Tom Cruise plays an elegant, fabulously wealthy physician who comes home from a holiday party to smoke dope with his gorgeous wife, Nicole Kidman. Under the influence of the weed, they enjoy memorably intense sex — the only sex in the whole dreary, salacious film that is portrayed in a romantic



and positive light.

Beyond such unblushing big-studio endorsements of illegal indulgence, today's independent "art films" go even further in showing drugs as the ultimate accessory of a hip, sexy lifestyle. No film this year has received better reviews than the edgy comedy *Go*, in which lovely Sarah Polley plays a reckless 17-year-old who cheats a pusher out of the potentially lethal "party drug" ecstasy, then distributes her goodies for fun and

profit. When one pal overdoses on the stuff and collapses, twitching and hallucinating, it's meant to be hilarious. After all, he quickly recovers.

In *Outside Providence*, a blue-collar kid (Shawn Hatosy) feels out of place in a snooty prep school and uses pot as his only ticket to acceptance. Despite his apparently limited intelligence and perpetually stoned demeanor, he manages to win (and keep) the affection of the prettiest, brightest girl in

the school (Amy Smart) by plying her with endless supplies of booze and weed.

The recently released *Splendor* unfolds before the public with its two main characters daringly consuming some exotic, hallucinogenic tea. The fun-loving twentysomethings comically enter a trance-like state that ultimately leads them to the steamy, wildly satisfying three-way sex that provides the film with its chief focus.

The most striking aspect of all of these recent drug scenes is their utterly gratuitous nature. Purging violence from major motion pictures has proved all but impossible because so many scripts use brutal "action" as essential plot points; you can't strip away the violence without fundamentally altering the motion pictures. Drugs, however, seldom play an indispensable role in the stories Hollywood chooses to tell, and their presence often comes across as something of a jaded afterthought. In the recently released *Stir of Echoes*, for instance, Illeana Douglas takes a moment to clear her head for a key conversation, mentioning that she and her friend have just enjoyed smoking a "fatty" (bulging marijuana joint). Would this film about a ghostly murder mystery have done a dime's less box office business, or somehow lost dramatic integ-

rity, if this reference had been avoided?

During his service as America's drug czar 10 years ago, Bill Bennett managed to make precisely these arguments with many producers and executives, and the results almost instantly appeared on screen. In place of the good-natured, goof-ball drug epics of the '70s (does anyone today remember Cheech and Chong?), Hollywood began showing substance abuse, if at all, as dangerous, destructive and criminal.

By 1994, the time of *Pulp Fiction* with its comedic treatment of Uma Thurman's thrilling, scary but ultimately harmless heroin overdose, this informal restraint had all but collapsed. The drug references now find their way even into material intended for very young audiences (*Never Been Kissed*), as if the filmmakers felt they must strain to show how hip and "youthful" they really were. Can anyone suggest that such an obvious change of attitude will fail to influence our kids?

In 1998, President Clinton and then-House speaker Newt Gingrich collaborated in finding \$1 billion in federal funds (to be matched by another billion from the television industry) to produce and distribute a series of anti-drug TV ads. How many of these 30- and 60-second spots would it take to counteract the

influence of one hit movie, seen by millions in theaters, on video and, eventually, on TV?

Hollywood moguls need not wait for harangues from a new Bill Bennett or any other official to clean up their act concerning this crucial matter. After all, there's little controversy when it comes to the importance of discouraging our children from doing drugs. When it comes to sexual morality, parents may disagree over what we reasonably can expect from our kids, but every home in America hopes (and prays) that its youngsters will be spared from the coils of the drug culture.

Parents have no right to demand that Hollywood do their job of child rearing for them, but there's no reason that Tinseltown must make that job so much harder than it needs to be. If the entertainment industry wants to prove that it takes seriously the widespread concern about troubled youth in every corner of this country, it could begin by avoiding some of the absolutely unnecessary, utterly irresponsible, smiling and winking movie references to drugs. We all realize that the children are watching.

Film critic Michael Medved hosts a daily national radio talk show. He is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.

Gun buy-backs feel good but miss target

By Jonathan D. Rockoff

Gun buy-back programs, a 1990s staple of local police departments, state law enforcement agencies and public dogooders, now are going national. President Clinton recently unveiled a \$15 million federal plan to buy up to 300,000 weapons from people around the country for a suggested price of \$50 per gun in cash, food or other items.

The consensus among firearm policy experts is that such buy-backs reduce suicides and accidents at home. But the experts also say buy-backs don't seem to have the effect the public hopes they will: They don't stop gang-bangers from firing at each other or drug dealers from engaging in lethal turf wars.

Gun buy-backs, in other words, don't stop criminals from using guns.

"They can reduce household-level risk factors from gun death or domestic violence or suicides or accidental deaths," said Jon S. Vernick, associate director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research. "They're not likely to be very effective reducing community rates of violent crime."

The effectiveness of buy-backs has not been studied nationally, although the new federal program will do that. Researchers, however, have examined several local programs and, by and large, reached similar conclusions.

Vernick, for example, helped study a buy-back program in Sacramento. The study found that most of the people turning in guns were middle-aged, and many were women — not the demographics of your typical armed criminal. A quarter of the guns didn't work, and many weren't the kinds normally used in violent crimes.

"The types of people who participate aren't really crime people," said Robert W. Schwoch of the Firearm Injury Center at the Medical College of Wisconsin, "and the kinds of guns that are captured aren't crime guns."

The Firearm Injury Center is finishing up a buy-back study in Milwaukee County. Schwoch said its preliminary findings mirror Vernick's conclusions.

Another study, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and published in 1994, found that two-thirds of those in a Seattle buy-back still owned other guns. A few said they would use the \$50 they received to buy another weapon.

More — much more — left at home

More importantly, the study found that the buy-back didn't affect the rates of firearm injuries, deaths and crimes — probably, the researchers surmised, because the 1,700 guns turned in amounted to just 1% of the guns in Seattle homes.

"Even under the unlikely assumption that guns turned in during buy-back programs are as likely to be used in a crime as the guns not exchanged, the effect of removing 1% of guns from the community on the rates of firearm crimes is negligible," the researchers concluded.

Buy-backs have been around for about two decades, but they took off in the early 1990s, with more than 100 held from 1992 to 1996, including the highly publicized Toys for Guns program, launched in 1993 in New York City.

A quick, dramatic 'solution'

At that time, the country was just beginning to realize the role a prevalence of guns was playing in the nation's serious street violence. Americans were looking for solutions. Buy-back programs offered the comforting spectacle of hundreds of collected guns spread out across large conference tables. Smiling police chiefs, attorneys general and politicians touted the efforts as sure-fire crime stoppers.

The more recent school shootings intensified both Americans' fears about firearms and their demands for help from the federal government. But social programs have little support in this Congress; gun-control legislation is stalled there.

On another front, several cities are suing gun manufacturers, hoping to hold them liable for gun violence, much as attorneys general held tobacco manufacturers liable for smokers' illnesses. But the legal theories behind the suits are untested.

The federal gun buy-back isn't likely to help much, either. Gun buy-backs are not terrible public policy. They deserve credit for keeping guns out of the hands of a curious child, a potential suicide or a violent spouse. But buy-backs, whether local or national in scope, are not going to be the solution to this country's serious problem of gun violence.

Jonathan D. Rockoff, a lawyer, is a police reporter for The Providence Journal.

Report finds no break in Hollywood violence

By Mike Snider
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Viewers see one scene of serious violence every four minutes while watching popular music videos, feature films and TV series, according to a report from a media research organization.

With acts of teen violence making news, lawmakers and others have appealed to the entertainment world to voluntarily reduce violence in programming. But the 1998-99 study sug-

gests violent images are as prevalent as ever, says Robert Lichter of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, which released the report Wednesday. "Hollywood is selling and glamorizing violence, and it may be making American kids more violent."

For the study, the group analyzed the 50 top-grossing films of 1998, 284 episodes from the 1998-99 TV season, 50 TV movies and 189 music videos that ran on MTV. Researchers counted 8,350 violent acts, more than half termed "serious" (murder, rape, kid-

napping or assault with a weapon):

► **TV.** Broadcast and cable series averaged six scenes of serious violence per episode. The biggest offender was CBS' *Walker, Texas Ranger* with 82, followed by TNT's *L.A. Heat*, HBO's *Oz* and the syndicated *Mortal Kombat* series.

► **Music videos.** Three minutes long on average, these proved to be the most violent, with about four violent scenes each. Most violent was rapper Nas' *Hate Me Now* with 16.

► **Movies.** The top films averaged 46 violent scenes. Most violent: *Saving Private Ryan* with 262, then *Lethal Weapon 4*, *Ronin* and *Blade*.

Admittedly, Lichter says, *Saving Private Ryan* is an exception in that

it doesn't glorify violence. But most other instances involved "dehumanizing" violence, he says.

The report "doesn't give much cause for hope," says Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., who has introduced legislation that would create a Senate task force to address the country's "cultural crisis."

CBS' Chris Ender called the report, which labels his network most violent, "completely off-base." *Walker*, he says, carries an appropriate rating — TV-14 with a V for violence — and "doesn't present violence for violence's sake."

"It's been applauded by law enforcement," Ender says. "It's good vs. evil, and the good guys always win."

3-D game carries double warning

The makers of an upcoming computer game, *Nocturne*, are adding a special warning label to scare off buyers who might not be prepared for the 3-D horror game's graphic content.

As special investigative agents — think *Men in Black* in the 1930s — players hunt monsters and prevent supernatural catastrophes. In addition to carrying an MA (mature audiences) rating under the industry's ratings system, *Nocturne* (due Oct. 31) will carry a special content label on the box: "WARNING! This game contains strong scenes of animated violence, language and some nudity. Suitable for mature audiences only."

Dallas-based game developer Terminal Reality and publisher Gathering of Developers worry that the current ratings system "is not adequate for educating consumers, especially around Christmastime," says Gathering CEO Mike Wilson, who was director of marketing and distribution at id Software, the creators of *Doom* and *Quake* games. *Nocturne*, he says, "contains content similar to a

horror movie and some nudity, but nothing pornographic."

Nocturne will come with a setting that allows adult language, nudity and bloodshed to be turned off.

Although highly unusual, the game isn't the first to carry an additional warning. *Kingpin* (Interplay/Xatrix), a crime game released this summer, comes with warnings in addition to its mature rating.

Violence in PC games drew renewed attention after teens responsible for school shootings this year and in 1997 were found to be fans of the violent game *Doom*.

Nintendo, Sega and Sony have agreed to include educational material about video game ratings in their hardware packaging by the holiday shopping season, says Doug Lowenstein, president of the Interactive Digital Software Association.

As for *Nocturne*'s extra warning, he says, "Our view is that anything that accurately communicates content to consumers is a plus."

By Mike Snider

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Owners to demolish dam that blocks fish from breeding areas

By Traci Watson
USA TODAY

A vast hydropower dam that has blocked salmon and trout from their historic breeding grounds since 1913 will be dismantled piece by piece early in the next century, under an unusual agreement announced Wednesday.

In an example of rare cooperation among environmentalists, private industry and government, the owners of the Condit Dam on the White Salmon River in Washington state agreed to start demolishing the 125-foot-high dam in 2006. First, a hole will be drilled most of the way through the concrete structure that can produce a modest 15 megawatts of electricity.

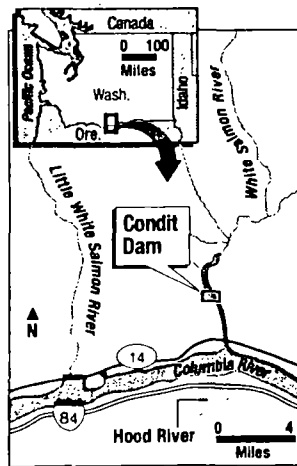
Then the hole will be blasted with explosives. That will allow the lake behind the dam to drain away at a rate of 10,000 cubic feet per second. Finally, the dam itself would be

sawed into chunks and removed. The draining of the lake is expected to take only a few hours.

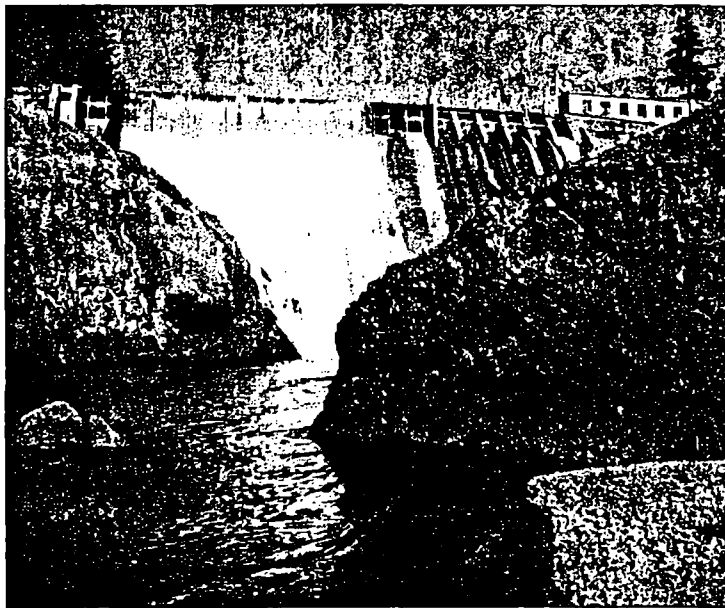
The unplugging of the White Salmon will help restore populations of fish that often reach mammoth proportions. Both chinook salmon and steelhead trout can weigh 40-60 pounds, and both species once spawned in the cold, pebbled stretches of the river that now lie upstream of the dam. Even now, nearly 90 years after the dam was built, a few fish try to swim to their ancestral spawning grounds but are stopped short by the concrete slab blocking the river.

The river still has chinook and steelhead swimming in it. But these are fish raised in net pens and released into the river by humans, and they are more sickly than wild fish.

The Condit's removal will make way for about 5,000 to 10,000 fish to spawn in the river.



By Kevin Rechin, USA TODAY



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

'On the White Salmon River: The Condit Dam, which has foiled salmon and trout trying to reach their breeding grounds, will be removed, starting in 2006.

Their ranks would include not only salmon and trout but other species such as the bull trout, the coastal cutthroat trout and the Pacific lamprey.

PacifiCorp, the owner of the dam, has agreed to contribute \$17 million for its removal and for projects to improve the fishery. In return, the company gets to operate the dam as it is for another seven years. Company officials say this option is preferable to spending \$28 million on ways to help fish over the dam, which PacifiCorp would have been required to do to keep the dam in operation.

Environmentalists are thrilled by the deal, and even traditional oppo-

nents of dam removal aren't protesting.

"I think this is a win-win," says Linda Ciocci, executive director of the National Hydropower Association.

The only people likely to be unhappy are those with vacation cottages that, at the moment, have a view of the lake that sits upstream of the dam. In 10 years, there won't be any lake. Instead, there will be a river, and its banks will be much farther from the cottages than the lakeshore was.

PacifiCorp is now deciding what to do about those who, by 2007, will no longer have lakefront property.

Mayors: Lack of skilled workers hurting cities

By Patrick O'Driscoll
USA TODAY

DENVER — A poll of America's mayors reports that a serious, widespread and increasing shortage of highly skilled workers is affecting their cities' ability to attract and keep businesses.

The survey of 110 mayors in 37 states found a shortage of skilled workers in four out of five cities. It also found that in 77% of those cities, the shortages have grown worse over the past five years. Almost nine in 10 of the mayors describe the shortfalls as serious or very serious.

The survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors will be released here today at a business leadership summit of more than 45 mayors and 30 business leaders.

At the end of the three-day meeting, the mayors group hopes to adopt a platform of metropolitan economic and business issues for the presidential election in 2000.

Cities in the survey included Chicago; Philadelphia; Boston; Pierre, S.D.; Alexandria, Va.; Atlanta; Detroit; and Lafayette, La.

"We want to put this urban agenda before all the candidates before New Hampshire," says Denver Mayor Wellington Webb, president of the mayors conference. "If Al Gore, George Bush, Bill Bradley and John McCain get up and talk about metropolitan economies, the assets of the cities, and investing in working families,

we'll know we've done our job."

The mayors who were surveyed represent about 10% of the conference's 1,100 members and a variety of large, medium and small cities.

Six in 10 of the mayors say the worker shortage affects technology businesses most seriously. Almost half say manufacturing is seriously affected, too. One-third cite the effect on the health field; about a quarter say the shortage hurts construction.

The survey, conducted in August and September, found that 58% of the mayors say the shortage of highly skilled workers is affecting their ability to attract new businesses.

Nearly four in 10 of the mayors say it is hurting their ability to keep existing businesses in their cities. Sixty-two percent say the shortage has affected efforts to expand businesses.

A companion survey of 174 mayors on regional issues rated the needs for more infrastructure, less traffic congestion, more worker training, less urban sprawl as the cities' serious challenges.

In each case, a majority say those challenges have worsened in the past decade.

The mayors were nervous in saying that long in their regions depend on cooperation between cities and suburbs than exists.

The top three issues for cooperation: traffic, economic development, affordable housing.