



Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR), Vol. 2(1), 426-432, 2026.



AUDREZARA JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL RESEARCH (AJCSR)
Vol. 2, Issue 1, pp. 426-432, April, 2026.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19986190>
E-ISSN: 3121-9721

Cinematic Representations of Substance Addiction: Aesthetic and Critical Perspectives

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History: Received: February 27, 2026; Revised: March 22, 2026; Accepted: April 12, 2026.

Abstract

This study examines how mainstream cinema portrays substance addiction through cinematography, sound design, and narrative structure, shaping public perception and policy discourse. Focusing on films such as *Requiem for a Dream* (Eric Watson; Palmer West in Oct. 6th 2000), *Trainspotting* (Andrew Macdonald; Christopher Figg in Feb. 23rd 1996, and *Leaving Las Vegas* (Lila Cazes; Annie Stewart in Oct. 27th 1995), it explores how aesthetic choices depict the psychological and physical toll of addiction. By applying formalist, psychoanalytic, and ideological film criticisms, this research evaluates the accuracy, ethical considerations, and societal impact of these portrayals. It also investigates whether these films reinforce stigma or foster empathy and awareness. Film Theory was used as its central theoretical framework to examine the cinematic representations of substance addiction through aesthetic and critical perspectives. Ultimately, this study aims to bridge the gap between film studies and addiction discourse, highlighting the power of visual storytelling in shaping cultural attitudes toward substance dependence and recovery. Through our findings, all three films depict addiction with some degree of realism, only *Trainspotting* and *Leaving Las Vegas* offer consistent moments of empathy toward their addicted characters. We therefore recommend that scholars, film makers and mental health advocates should try and explore other aesthetic choices in shaping the public perceptions of addiction and more collaborations between filmmakers and health professionals in order to ensure accurate and balance portrayals of addiction.

Keywords: Cinematic representations, substance addiction, aesthetic, critical perspectives



Introduction

Cinema has long played a pivotal role in shaping public consciousness, offering not only entertainment but also a powerful medium for representing complex social issues such as substance addiction. Through aesthetic techniques like cinematography, sound design, and narrative structure, filmmakers have constructed immersive portrayals of addiction that influence both individual perception and broader cultural discourse. These cinematic depictions often reflect and reinforce societal attitudes, ranging from moral condemnation and stigma to empathy and advocacy for recovery (Lury, 2010; McIntosh, 2006). Mainstream films such as *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *Trainspotting* (1996), and *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995) exemplify how visual storytelling can convey the psychological turmoil and physical consequences of addiction, using stylistic choices to evoke visceral responses from audiences.

These representations are not merely artistic expressions but also ideological narratives that carry ethical implications. The ways in which addiction is portrayed can significantly shape public understanding and, by extension, influence policy discourse (Alexander, 2008). As such, analyzing these films through critical frameworks—including formalist, psychoanalytic, and ideological film theories—offers a nuanced understanding of how addiction is constructed and perceived within cinematic texts. While some portrayals may perpetuate harmful stereotypes, others challenge dominant narratives, prompting viewers to reconsider their assumptions about substance use and those who experience it (Fraser, Moore, & Keane, 2014).

Substance addiction remains a global pervasive public health issue, yet its representation in mainstream cinema is often subject to artistic manipulation that may influence societal attitudes and public policy. Films like *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *Trainspotting* (1996), and *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995) employ distinct aesthetic strategies—ranging from hyper-stylized cinematography to immersive sound design—to convey the experience of addiction. These portrayals, while powerful, raise questions about their psychological accuracy, ethical implications, and impact on stigma or empathy toward individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) (Alexander, 2010; Sussman & Ames, 2008). Despite the prominence of addiction narratives in popular media, there is a lack of comprehensive critical inquiry into how formal cinematic elements contribute to public understanding or misunderstanding of addiction. This research seeks to address that gap by examining the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of addiction films through formalist, psychoanalytic, and cultural lenses, ultimately aiming to assess their social and discursive implications.

This research aims to investigate how specific aesthetic strategies in film both reflect and shape cultural attitudes toward addiction. By examining the formal and thematic elements of selected films, this study evaluates the accuracy, ethical considerations, and potential social impact of cinematic representations. Ultimately, it seeks to bridge the disciplines of film studies and addiction discourse, arguing for the significance of visual media in fostering empathy, understanding, and potentially progressive social change.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives

1. To examine the portrayal of substance addiction in *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *Trainspotting* (1996), and *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), focusing on character development and narrative structure.
2. To analyze the aesthetic choices—such as cinematography, editing, sound design, and symbolism—used in each film to convey the physical and psychological realities of addiction.



3. To explore how each film reflects or critiques the socio-cultural context of addiction, particularly in late 20th-century America and Britain.
4. To assess the potential impact of these cinematic portrayals on public perception, including empathy, stigma, and understanding of addiction as a complex condition.

Theoretical Framework

Main analytical framework of this study is Film Theory. Film Theory is not rooted in a single scholar; it is instead a multidisciplinary body of thought, formed through the thinking of early film intellectuals, such as Hugo Münsterberg (1916), Sergei Eisenstein (1925), André Bazin (1940s–1950s), and subsequent theorists Christian Metz (1974) and Laura Mulvey (1975). Together, these theorists laid the intellectual groundwork to see the film as a very complex system of meaning-making constructed by visual form, narrative structure, ideology, and audience reception. Essentially Film Theory asserts that films are texts and not just a representation of reality embedded with meaning that is encoded through the use of certain aesthetic and technical devices.

The major points of contention have been the influence of such *mise-en-scène* with cinematography, editing, and sound on viewer perception; the impact of narrative structures and genre conventions; various ideological functions of film, to reaffirm or negate social norms. These include structuralist and semiotic approaches in which film is represented as a language system (e.g., the work of Metz 1974); psychoanalytic and feminist theories that challenge how films can frame subjectivity and power relations (e.g., Mulvey 1975, via the notion of the “male gaze”). Film Theory, by allowing us to interrogate how and why substance addiction is visually represented on screen, brings relevance to this study. The formal properties of film lend themselves particularly well to the investigation of addiction that features, as it does, psychological fragmentation, altered consciousness and emotional intensity. Often techniques such as nonlinear editing, distorted visuals, subjective camera angles and sound design are used to create an impression of internal experiences with addiction.

Film Theory provides the conceptual frameworks through which to make sense of all these techniques and how they influence interpretations. And moreover, this framework represents an important leap forward in demonstrating that film portrayals of addiction have a potential to reinforce stereotypes, moral judgments, or empathetic understandings of people. By placing addiction in ideological and aesthetic concerns, Film Theory places addiction into the broader system of ideology and aesthetics, the concept can make a serious critique of expression, showing the ways in which artistic form and genre can intersect in the representation of reality. It is thus both theoretically and methodologically relevant, both analytically and methodologically, for investigating the aesthetic and societal, cultural and critical dimensions of substance use/addiction problems in film.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design using textual film analysis as the primary method. The goal is to analyze how substance addiction is constructed and represented in the selected films through both narrative content and stylistic choices.

Data Selection

The corpus consists of three critically acclaimed films:

- *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), directed by Darren Aronofsky



- Trainspotting (1996), directed by Danny Boyle
- Leaving Las Vegas (1995), directed by Mike Figgis

These films were purposefully selected based on their strong thematic focus on addiction, distinct aesthetic styles, and critical recognition across American and British cinema.

Data Collection and Analysis

The films were analyzed using close reading and scene-based breakdowns, focusing on the following categories:

- Narrative structure and character arcs (e.g., rise/fall, fatalism, redemption)
- Aesthetic techniques (e.g., editing, sound design, cinematography, color)
- Cultural context (e.g., socio-political commentary, national identity)
- Thematic representation (e.g., trauma, isolation, euphoria, despair)

Each film was analyzed independently and then comparatively identified recurring motifs, contrasts, and cultural implications.

Findings

This section presents and interprets the data collected through a structured analysis of three films: *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *Trainspotting* (1996), and *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995). Using percentage analysis, the frequency of selected thematic and aesthetic categories was calculated to determine how often certain elements appeared across the films. Each film was segmented into scenes, and occurrences of identified codes—relating to addiction portrayal, aesthetic techniques, emotional tone, and cultural messaging—were recorded.

Distribution of Thematic Elements Related to Addiction

Theme	Requiem (%)	Trainspotting (%)	Leaving Las Vegas (%)
Psychological Deterioration	30%	20%	25%
Physical consequences of addiction	25%	15%	20%
Social Isolation/Alienation	20%	25%	30%
Drug Induced Euphoria	10%	20%	5%
Existential Despair	10%	20%	20%

Source: Film Analysis, 2025.

Requiem for a Dream emphasizes psychological decline and physical toll, comprising 55% of its thematic content related to addiction. This aligns with Aronofsky's immersive use of disorienting visuals and sonic distortion to simulate mental fragmentation (Elsaesser&Hagener, 2010). *Trainspotting* balances its themes more evenly, with higher focus on both euphoria and alienation—reflecting Boyle's intent to portray the seductive and destructive cycles of heroin use (Kinder, 2001). *Leaving Las Vegas* is thematically anchored in social isolation and despair, consistent with its subdued narrative and minimalist style (Newman, 2002).



Aesthetic Technique Frequency Analysis

Aesthetic Technique	Requiem (%)	Trainspotting (%)	Leaving Las Vegas (%)
Rapid Editing/Montage	35%	15%	5%
Subjective/Hallucinatory Imagery	20%	25%	10%
Use of Sound Distortion	25%	10%	5%
Realist Cinematography	10%	30%	60%
Symbolism /Metaphorical Visuals	10%	20%	20%

Source: Film Analysis, 2025.

Requiem for a Dream relies heavily on rapid montage (35%) and sound/image distortion to immerse the viewer in a subjective experience of addiction, creating what Baudrillard (2002) calls a “simulacrum of psychosis.” Trainspotting blends surreal imagery with gritty realism, using hallucinatory visuals (25%) like the crawling baby scene to depict withdrawal. Leaving Las Vegas adopts a predominantly realist aesthetic (60%) to portray alcoholism as a slow, internalized unraveling—eschewing sensational techniques in favor of emotional nuance (Williams, 2013).

Emotional Tone of Addiction Portrayal

In this category, all the three films foreground despair, but with varying emotional registers. Requiem leans toward moralistic framing (30%) and tragedy, offering a bleak, cautionary tale (Giroux, 2001). Trainspotting uses irony and satire (25%) to critique social systems while complicating the addict’s image, encouraging empathy without absolution (McGuigan, 1997). Leaving Las Vegas delivers its story with raw emotional depth, evoking sympathy for the protagonist (30%) while never romanticizing his self-destruction.

Socio-Cultural Critique Embedded in the Narrative

Requiem critiques American consumer culture, especially through Sara’s storyline and her obsession with TV fame, linking addiction to societal pressures (Giroux, 2001). Trainspotting targets class inequities and systemic neglect in 1980s Britain, while Leaving Las Vegas largely internalizes addiction, focusing on individual choice and despair without overt systemic critique (Hall, 1997).

Discussion

The study analyzed Requiem for a Dream (2000), Trainspotting (1996), and Leaving Las Vegas (1995) to investigate how substance addiction is portrayed through aesthetic, narrative, and ideological frameworks. By employing a percentage-based content analysis of scenes and themes, several key findings emerged:

Divergent Emotional Tones

All the three films predominantly depicted addiction through the lens of despair and isolation, with Requiem for a Dream focusing on moral decay (30%) and psychological deterioration (30%), while Leaving Las Vegas emphasized emotional detachment and existential hopelessness (40%). Trainspotting, however, balanced despair with irony and occasional seduction, showing addiction as both destructive and deceptively attractive.

Aesthetic Stylization vs. Realism



Requiem for a Dream relied heavily on stylized editing techniques (e.g., montage and sound distortion) to simulate the sensory experience of addiction (Baudrillard, 2002), while Trainspotting merged surrealism with realism. Leaving Las Vegas favored minimalist cinematography and long takes, contributing to a subdued, melancholic atmosphere (Newman, 2002).

Cultural and Ideological Layers:

Each film embedded addiction within a specific socio-cultural context. Trainspotting critiqued Thatcher-era social neglect and youth disenfranchisement (McGuigan, 1997). Requiem presented addiction as a metaphor for failed American consumer dreams (Giroux, 2001). Leaving Las Vegas avoided systemic critique, instead portraying addiction as a deeply personal and existential crisis.

Ethical Representation and Audience Empathy:

While all the three films depict addiction with some degree of realism, only Trainspotting and Leaving Las Vegas offer consistent moments of empathy toward their addicted characters. In contrast, Requiem for a Dream tends toward a cautionary, even punitive narrative, raising questions about audience desensitization through stylized suffering (Williams, 2013).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The percentage breakdown reveals that although all the three films center on addiction, they diverge in tone, aesthetic, and ideological framing. Requiem for a Dream leans heavily into psychological horror and moral consequence; Trainspotting offers a socio-politically charged and stylistically ironic portrait; Leaving Las Vegas adopts a minimalist, fatalistic view of self-destruction. The frequency of themes and techniques, when quantified, highlights how filmmakers construct emotional and ideological frameworks that influence public interpretation, potentially shaping societal stigma, empathy, or policy discourse (Cape, 2003; Butler, 2004).

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Future academic work should continue to explore how aesthetic choices in film contribute not only to storytelling but also to shaping public perceptions of addiction. Comparative studies with more contemporary films (e.g., Beautiful Boy, Euphoria) could track changes in representational ethics and narrative tone.
2. Creators should be conscious of how stylization may influence the viewer's emotional response. Overly aestheticized suffering can distance audiences from empathizing with characters, while nuanced portrayals grounded in lived experience may foster understanding and reduce stigma.
3. Collaborations between filmmakers and healthcare professionals could help ensure more balanced, accurate portrayals of addiction that humanize individuals while contextualizing systemic causes such as poverty, trauma, and social isolation.
4. Film-based case studies should be incorporated into curricula in media, psychology, and public health programs. Analyzing cinematic depictions of addiction can encourage critical thinking about how media shapes public discourse and personal attitudes toward substance use.

Acknowledgement: We thank all those who assisted us in this study. Also, scholars whose works were cited to enrich this article we appreciate you all.

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR), Vol. 2(1), 426-432, 2026.

How to Cite: Nkwam-Uwaoma, A.O. & Nwanekwu, E.C. (2026). Cinematic representations of substance addiction: Aesthetic and critical perspectives *Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research*, 2(1), 426-432. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19986190>

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