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# From the Exemplary North to the Violent South: North American Representations Of Marihuana in Documentaries

To understand the stigma that marihuana still carries in U. S. American society—which, for starters, is called by its Mexican name—we would have to address thousands of years of continental bustle in which marihuana went from being a sacred plant to becoming a threat to Christian orthodoxy, with hemp eventually standing as the raw material behind the industrialization of Europe and North America. Yet, the modern history of its defamation in the United States is much more recent and dates to the 1930s, when the government launched a campaign against its production, sale, and consumption based on the medical assumptions of the time, racial conjectures, political calculations, and market strategies.

Though this campaign was developed from the realm of politics, it was also deployed through the media, with radio content as well as a vast symbolic universe of representations in images and film. While cinema remained an incipient industry in the United States of the time, its pedagogical possibilities were quickly noticed by the ideologues of the prohibition campaign. Fiction motion pictures like *Reefer Madness* (dir. Louis J. Gasnier, 1936)<sup>1</sup> and *Marihuana* (Dwain Esper, 1936),<sup>2</sup> synthesized the Federal Bureau of Narcotics's message under commissioner Harry Anslinger: that marihuana is a dangerous drug that kills the young as well as a surefire path to crime and moral and racial degradation.

With their sensationalist tone and adherence to government scripts, these and many other films have been

catalogued as propaganda, that is, as intentional and systematic communicative exercises seeking to mold the perceptions and behaviors of spectators through coercion. Yet, this discursive crusade was not limited to fiction films. Especially after the Second World War, documentary films on the dangers of drugs and alcohol proliferated. Public and private U. S. institutions, such as the Narcotic Educational Foundation of America and the John Birch Society, produced their own films that sought to indoctrinate specific audiences.

In the 1950s, the government expanded its war on drugs to even more spaces, including schools. Ever since the Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) administration, certain recommendations to include education on drugs in school curricula were issued. Propaganda shorts became rampant, proving instrumental and playing an important role in the dissemination of official discourse as well as in the configuration of stigmas that would live on in social imaginaries for decades. These films, like the discourse of the post-war era, tended to point toward the communist bloc as an enemy of the United States in the international terrain, and to drugs as the enemy in the domestic realm. It is thus no surprise that some post-war short films on drugs suggest that the increased marihuana consumption in the United States was the product of a Soviet strategy to destroy the United States from the inside out.

It was not until the 1960s that cannabis-decriminalization activists started taking up documentary film to champion their own cause. The '60s marked one of the most intense periods in modern U. S. political history. A new generation that was wary of institutions—whether religious, political, or economic—emerged in the political

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scene and spearheaded fights for civil rights that would pry open spaces that were once off limits for Black Americans, youths, and women.

These countercultural movements sparked harsh criticism of the U. S. American way of life: the stage was set for a revolution in social conventions and sexual practices. Amid such dramatic social change, marihuana was more than symbolic: it proved defining in creative environments as well as in the articulation of political movements that sought to transform public life like never before in the history of the United States. In documentary cinema, films like the *World of the Weed* (1968) criticized prohibition and made room for an unprejudiced debate around marihuana legalization.

Despite the aggressive propaganda campaigns behind Richard Nixon (1969-1974) and then Ronald Reagan's (1981-1989) wars on drugs, by the late twentieth century, a new perspective on marihuana had gained headway, as had another way of documenting it. Both in fiction film as well as in documentaries, representation of marihuana gradually shifted to become more tolerant, less solemn, and sometimes even comical. The millennium ended with one of the most comprehensive documentary approaches to marihuana—*Grass* (1999), by Ron Mann—a critical review of the U. S. Government's war on marihuana throughout the twentieth century that considered the racist propaganda of the Anslinger era spanning the first few decades of the prohibition, the challenges of increased consumption during and after the countercultural movements, the symbolism of marihuana in the activism against the Vietnam War, and even the fact that William Clinton (1993-2001) would become the first president in U. S. history to publicly admit that he had consumed marihuana.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, this first documentary to ever broadly and critically deal with marihuana consumption in the United States was in fact a Canadian production. Years later, Ron Mann (Toronto, 1958) stated that he had feared that the U. S. government would censure the documentary as

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foreign political propaganda, as was the case with the National Film Board's Cold-War era documentary on antinuclear activism *If You Love This Planet* (dir. Terre Nash, 1982).<sup>4</sup>

## Documentary Activism Around Cannabis in the Twenty-First Century

Documentary films arguing for the legitimacy of the recreational, medicinal, and industrial use of cannabis have proliferated for the first few decades of the twenty-first century. Since documentary representations are rhetorical constructions by definition, we should highlight a few examples that demonstrate how, in twenty-first-century pro-cannabis documentary activism, discourses around the fight for the legalization of marihuana in the United States have tended to showcase nearby examples in order to draw comparisons and lead spectators to the directors' desired conclusions. Besides providing a foreign perspective, Ron Mann's documentary film *Grass* also contrasts the differences in marihuana-related policy in the United States and Canada in order to draw comparisons between Canadians' liberal attitude and the conservatism of their neighbors to the south.

Meanwhile, the documentary *Escape to Canada* (dir. Albert Nerenberg, 2005) portrays the "Summer of Legalization" when restrictions around consumption were temporarily relaxed in 2003. Produced by the National Film Board (NFB), the film portrays how, in the early twenty-first century, soldiers, marihuana consumers, and same-sex couples were drawn toward the more permissive laws in Canada. According to the director, the two countries evidently took two different paths after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001:



*Escape to Canada* (dir. Albert Nerenberg, 2005).

Canada is portrayed as a close and tangible example of what can unfold if cannabis regulation progresses, while Mexico, in contrast, represents the risks of prologuing prohibitionist policies: violence, corruption, and death.

while the terrorist attacks exacerbated conservatism, nationalism, and Christian extremism in the United States, Canada took the opposite route.

Though the documentary deals with a specific moment in Canada's recent history, there's an underlying subject that has always permeated discussions around Canadian identity: its differences with the United States. Yet, with the arrival of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015) and his national antidrug strategy, the liberal turn that *Escape to Canada* describes would remain on hold until the Liberals returned to power in 2015. The film highlights that, "in 2001 [Canada] was the first country in the world in to legalize medical marihuana. In 2003, the country began looking to decriminalizing all marihuana and legalizing same-sex marriage. Canada, you might say, was on a freedom streak, but Canada lives in the shadow of America, the land of the free, and perhaps for the first time and in a big way was trying to choose its own path."

Two other Canadian films coincide in their comparisons of how marihuana is addressed in different parts of the North American region. *The Union: The Business Behind Getting High* (2007), a documentary by the Canadian Brett Harvey, deals with the harvest and sale of marihuana in Canada as well as with its traffic to the United States.<sup>5</sup> The documentary cites government statistics estimating that, by 2007, thousands of British Columbian households grew "BC Bud," a strain of marihuana produced in domestic spaces reaching a sky-high price per pound in the United States, which imported more than 80 percent of this Canadian product at the time. The documentary highlights the historical importance of hemp for the United States and Canada but also focuses on the propaganda distributed during both of their prohibitions, with expert opinions on legal and medical matters. Though it does describe the illegal traffic of marihuana from one country to another, the documentary does not portray it as violent or as a security issue. Rather, the sequences and testimonies in the



*The Culture High* (dir. Brett Harvey, 2014).

documentary suggest that there is a certain degree of permissiveness among the Canadian authorities regarding the plant's production, consumption, and traffic. Standing in a bustling square on Cannabis Day in Vancouver, actor Adam Scorgie asks himself why it is that the United States arrests activists while, in Canada, the police think there's no point in arresting people who smoke right under their noses.

Seven years later, Brett Harvey would direct what he called the sequel to his 2007 documentary, *The Culture High* (2014), this time focusing on the United States.<sup>6</sup> Using archival materials, Harvey outlines the history of marihuana's criminalization as of the 1930s followed by Nixon and Reagan's wars on drugs. In the second part, he analyzes the state of cannabis-related medical treatments and the progress in regularization laws across several states. Lastly, he points toward the economic motivations behind keeping the prohibition in place, as well as to the high costs of the U. S. penitentiary system, with Black youths facing higher arrest and sentencing rates than any other sector of the population.

The documentary starts with a striking scene: a team of special armed forces storms into a house and wakes up a family in the middle of the night. The reason: traces of marihuana and a pipe were found in the family's dumpster. From its incipience, Harvey's documentary prepares us for the conclusions, namely, the need to decriminalize the use, production, and entry of marihuana into the United States.

This film articulates its comparative exercise by looking toward the south. While *Escape to Canada* portrays the openness of Canadian society and *The Union* outlines the authorities' permissiveness around recreational production and consumption, *The Culture High* focuses on Mexico to illustrate the consequences of perpetrating prohibition.

Highly violent images taken by the Mexican press are shown onscreen while commentators explain the toll of the war on drugs: homicides, kidnappings, torture, extortions, impunity, and a vulnerable State. One Drug Enforcement Agency officer provides context for U. S. American spectators by affirming that the casualties had already surpassed the Vietnam War's: "The drug war has really led to a deterioration in the infrastructures of society, which means that virtually every municipal police force and much of Mexico is corrupted by one cartel or another."

In the comparisons posed by these documentaries, Canada is portrayed as a close and tangible example of what can unfold if cannabis regulation progresses, while Mexico, in contrast, represents the risks of prologuing prohibitionist policies: violence, corruption, and death.

With their inherent authority, persuasive abilities, and apparent transparency in depicting reality, documentary representations were once used as government propaganda in films that put forward unidirectional and undisputed messages that sought to perpetuate stigmas against cannabis. The opening of the 1960s served to bring forward other points of view, but it was not until the twenty-first century that representations of marihuana consumption emphatically transformed in non-fiction films.

Almost a century after the prohibition of marihuana in the United States, today's outlook seems quite different. Documentaries of varying tones —ranging from humorous to decidedly informative ones— have allowed for the debates between activists and the authorities to transcend the screen, endowing the broader public with arguments in favor and against legalization. These films tend to address the issue from different geographic levels: local, when addressing state needs; national, when referring to the history of prohibition; but also regional, when looking to Canada and Mexico. **MM**

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**Notes**

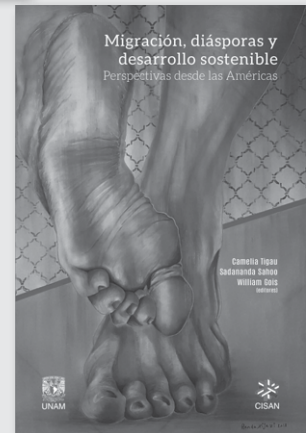
- 1 *Reefer Madness* (dir. Louis J. Gasnier, United States, George Hirliman Productions, 1936).
- 2 *Marihuana* (dir. Dwain Esper, United States, Roadshow Attractions, 1936).
- 3 *Grass* (dir. Ron Mann, United States, Sphinx Productions, 1999).
- 4 *If You Love This Planet* (dir. Terre Nash, Canada, NFB, 1982).
- 5 *The Union: The Business behind Getting High* (dir. Brett Harvey, Canada-United States, Score G Productions, 2007).
- 6 *The Culture High* (dir. Brett Harvey, United States, Score G Productions, 2014).



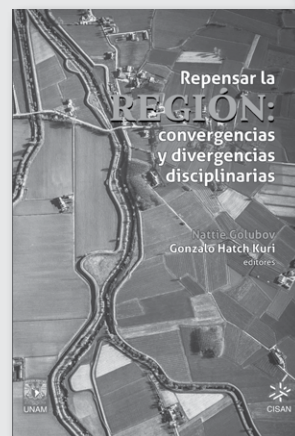
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