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## **"I don't believe the effects of that picture will ever wear off": Film narratives as instigators of smoking, drinking and other worrisome behaviour – commentary on Green and Clark**

"Transportation theory" deals with phenomena which have been noted, valued and worried about since the days of Aristotle (catharsis) and Plato (mimesis and diegesis): we are often moved, and may sometimes be changed, by being caught up in a well-told story. In academic psychology, which tends to start from assumptions that humans set their path by cognitive rationality and learning, transportation theory brings back in the potential importance of emotions and the recognition that a parable is often more powerful than an exposition.

Green and Clark's article [1] considering the application of transportation theory to the potential effects of movies in encouraging tobacco smoking can be related to a long tradition. Worries that movies may have especially powerful effects, potentially leading young viewers away from desired norms or rational behaviour, arose early in the history of movies. The worries motivated a series of linked studies of "motion pictures and youth" carried out in 1929-1932. Among them was a study of *Movies and Conduct* by the sociologist Herbert Blumer, then at the start of his career, which collected and analysed "motion picture autobiographies" from over 1000 young Americans [2]. A major element in Blumer's analysis is an equivalent of "transportation theory", which he termed "emotional possession": a "type of experience ... in the course of which, through having his emotions roused, the individual loses self-control.... Impulses which are ordinarily restrained are strongly stimulated.... This emotional condition may get such a strong grip on the individual that even his efforts to rid himself of it by reasoning with himself may prove of little avail". [2, p. 74] Blumer notes that emotional possession is usually short-lived, but then, as now, there was a strong hypothesis that such a powerful experience may have lasting effects, as expressed by one of Blumer's informants in this comment's title. [2, p. 102] While "emotional possession", like "transportation theory", could propel the audience member into approved as well as disapproved behaviour patterns, the emphasis then as now tended to be on the problem side.

Another study in the series, *The Content of Motion Pictures*, ranged quite widely in its content analysis of, among other samples, 115 US movies from 1928-1930 [3]. Included in the analyses were counts of pictures “containing liquor situations” (78%) and with someone using tobacco (88%) – far higher than drinking and smoking rates then in the US population. Presentations of both behaviours were tilted toward the favourable; heroes were much more likely than villains to be shown drinking (43% vs. 13%) and using tobacco (65% vs. 23%). [3, pp. 167-172]

The problem, then and now, is in establishing the predictive power of possession or transportation in changing beliefs and behaviour, particularly concerning behaviours like smoking or drinking which are often peripheral to the plotline. Those making the movies are often seeking to tap into cultural trends; the individual might have changed anyway, due to cultural change or just to maturation, without the experience of possession or transportation. At a minimum, with respect to both alcohol and tobacco in the 1920s and 1930s, the American movies of the era can be described as “amplifiers of cultural change” [4] – but the changes in drinking and smoking were being driven also by many other factors.

Even if the predictive power is established, there is the question of what to do about it. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw much movie censorship, in the US and elsewhere, but effective censorship operates within limits in an open society, and voluntary cooperation has also proved to have its limits. Besides, the censor’s task is complicated by the finding that what the audience draws from a movie may diverge from the movie’s overt moral framework – as, for instance, Charles Winick found in a study of audience response to a film, *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), which aimed to present drug addiction negatively; teenagers instead responded positively to a heroin addict portrayed by a famous actor [5].

From my perspective, it would be helpful if work on transportation theory took more into account traditions of work which have used other terminology, such as absorption, engagement, flow or peak experience, for the same or closely related experiences [6]. Thus, according to Slater and Rouner, “engagement, absorption, and transportation are three terms used by different researchers to describe the same phenomenon” [7].

That said, increased attention by psychologists to audience effects of media is welcome. And the idea that becoming caught up in the storyline of a film can have lasting effects is a useful counterpoint to approaches which focus solely on persuasion by argument and through cognition. Consideration of such effects

with respect to tobacco, alcohol and drugs is a potentially fruitful revival of the phenomena and concerns that Herbert Blumer and his colleagues first analysed.

### **Declaration of interests**

None

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