

Addiction & the Humanities Vol. 4(1) - Frank "Superfly" Lucas: American Gangster

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In the last Humanities, we discussed the role of Khun Sa, "[The Golden Triangle King](#)", in international drug trafficking. Based out of Myanmar (formerly Burma) Khun Sa had enormous success in growing and trafficking opium. Continuing with the theme of drug trafficking, this week's HUMANITIES reviews the newly released Denzel Washington movie, American Gangster. The movie is similar to other Hollywood movies depicting gangsters and drug dealers (e.g., The Godfather I, II, and III, Scarface, Goodfellas, Hustle and Flow), but American Gangster's storyline is inspired by a real drug dealer: Frank "Superfly" Lucas.

The title American Gangster is the first clue to the movie's importance in American Culture. The movie explains the dry, meticulous business of successful drug trafficking in America, giving it an almost legitimate feel. Further, and more importantly, the movie also provides its viewers with an inside view to the world of successful drug dealers, giving considerable insight into what that world says about drugs and addiction in the United States.

In a move that focuses attention on the US's national drug market, the movie contains only 3 international links: Lucas's wife is of Puerto Rican descent, (although Puerto Rico is a US Territory its culture is distinct from US Culture), the Vietnam War serves as a historical backdrop, and Lucas's product supplier farms his opium in Asia. Although these international links are important, they do not detract from the fact that cutting, shipping, distribution and, most importantly, profit all happen within the US and to benefit US citizens. Even members of the US military participated in the illegal activities. Having been contracted by Lucas, some military personnel turned a blind eye to, and guided the illegal cargo across international lines. This imagery conveys the message to the American public that the leaders of successful drug trafficking operations (people similar to Khun Sa,) are not always based outside of the country. Furthermore, those in the US are often more successful due to the demand for high quality opioid in the West and the reduced price at which people like Frank

Lucas could and did purchase purer drugs from the East.

Picture:

(left) Frank Lucas and his wife Julie Lucas

(right) Actors Denzel Washington & Lynmari Nadal as Frank and Eva Lucas.



Further substantiating the significance of the American drug dealer, with minimal glamorization, the movie *American Gangster* shows the cycle that perpetuates within successful American drug trafficking. This cycle is the same supply and demands cycle that influences international drug trafficking, as well as a lifestyle that rejects the use of addictive substances. However, the cycle has the added elements of familial hierarchy and business. In the movie, Frank Lucas "inherits" his drug business after the death of his former employer, for whom he was the driver. He subsequently expands it by using the services of his closest relatives: his brothers. Furthermore, Frank Lucas's character never uses any of the products that he sells. He doesn't drink excessively, smoke or gamble excessively or engage with any other addictive activities. In fact, various scenes in the movie (e.g., a party at his home in which he is infuriated by a "high" guest) show his disdain for those that use drugs and lack the self-control required to stay away from them. Frank's only addictive behavior pattern, and the reason for his steady success, is his penchant for working constantly.

American Gangster's geographical setting, Harlem, provides the viewing public with a familiar locale within which to place and understand one aspect of American drug trafficking. Because of its rich history — the Harlem Renaissance, significant cultural diversity before the Great Depression, the 1968 riot following Martin Luther King's assassination, and David N. Dinkins 1989 election as mayor

— Harlem is familiar to most movie-goers. Even for movie-goers that will not recognize Harlem, the presentation of a poorer neighborhood with unsafe apartment complexes filled with illegal drugs is a well-known image with which viewers can easily identify. Movies, television, books, and news outlets repeatedly present these images as a common setting for drug abuse.

The American Gangster movie formula is not a new one: information about a drug dealer's pre-drug business life, his rise to power and notoriety, and his downfall. However, American Gangster is interesting and worth seeing. Both leads, Denzel Washington and Russell Crowe play their parts well, and the imagery in the movie is evocative. The movie's plot becomes even more interesting when viewers take the time to research the real Frank Lucas. In two New York Magazine interviews, from 2000 and 2007, images and quotes from the real Frank Lucas (Jacobson, 2000; Jacobson, 2007) immediately bring the reader back to specific scenes in the movie. Although the movie is not biographical, the attention to details and facts from Frank Lucas' life is captivating. For example, the left side of the above photo is not of Denzel Washington, but of the real Frank Lucas and his wife; movie-goers will remember that the same fur coat ultimately brings about Lucas' downfall in the movie.

What do you think? Comments can be addressed to Ingrid R. Maurice.

References

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