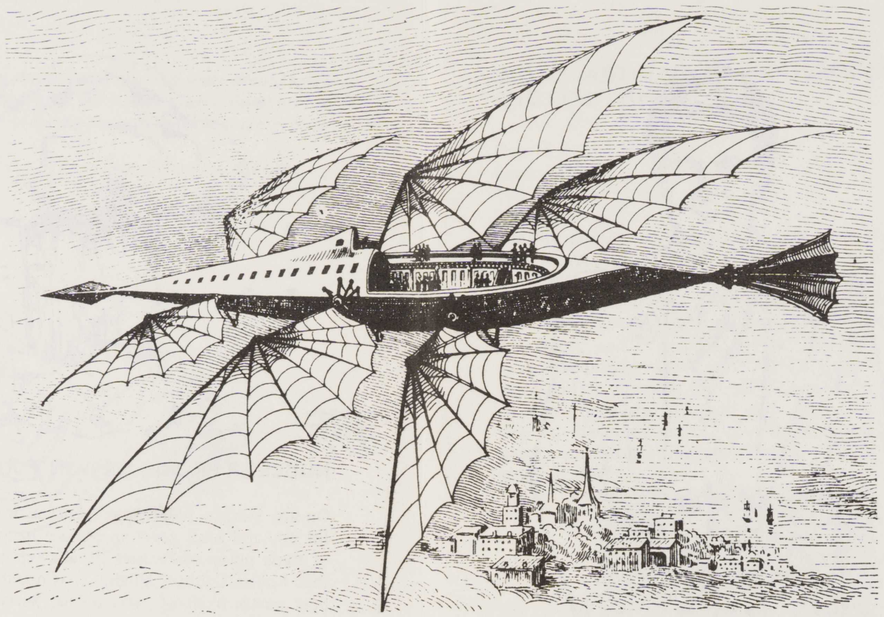
BOYS, DRUGS, AND SEX:
A Note on Ideology

When I was much younger, I saw (well, I should confess, I *bought*) a little dirty booklet called *Boys, Drugs, and Sex*. As pornography, it was inept, clumsy, dreary; but its title points to something worth taking note of: The ideological apparatus of our society puts drugs and sex into the same qualitative category, and considers both somehow naughty. Indeed, what might be called the celebration of sex in popular culture is not really a celebration of sex *per se* but a celebration of the *naughtiness* of sex. The gratification of our sensual appetites, our culture tells us, is something we should indulge in, but only if we feel the appropriate degree of guilt and self-loathing.

The photographic images presented in that little magazine linger in my mind to this day, though it's been ten years since I saw it: A very handsome blond boy of about 18 trying to look self-possessed without his clothes on in a variety of poses. And another fellow taking visible pleasure in enacting for the camera what I'm sure only a very few have done or wanted to do for real: He was shown with a hypodermic needle, ostensibly shooting some kind of drugs into his penis. Boys, drugs, and sex. Golly.

Images presented as pornography work only if what they represent is regarded as forbidden; without the tincture of forbidden-ness, pictures of people fucking or women being mounted by German shepherds or boys sticking needles in their penises would have no more intrinsic interest than pictures of people sitting in chairs or scrambling eggs or blowing their noses (which is not to say that these things are without interest).



What provokes me to all of this is a long-distance telephone conversation I've just had with a friend who is in a drug-rehabilitation program at a hospital north of here. My friend has had very real problems with drugs and alcohol (and sex, for that matter), to the point where he's endangered his sanity and his life. I had begun to fear that he would destroy himself, and he's a person very much worth saving.

But what they seem to be teaching him in this program is that by "getting in touch with his feelings" and "feeling good about himself" he can, as it were, rise above these nasty sensual appetites that are expressed in taking drugs. To my way of thinking, this is the crudest sort of ideological indoctrination, as subtle as its execution may be. My friend is being brought to believe in the naughtiness of pornography; he is being brought to believe that the choice he has to make is either to embrace or reject his own wickedness.

Perhaps what irritates me most is that my friend has not only seemingly bought this crap, but wants me (as a fellow lotos-eater) to buy it too, wants me to share the kind of self-loathing and self-abnegation that has been sold him under the label of self-acceptance. To believe that you take drugs because of a failure to understand yourself is to believe that you're a failure. To believe that you take drugs because you don't understand or can't cope with your feelings of inadequacy or loneliness is to believe in the primacy of your lack of understanding, your inadequacy, and your loneliness. To believe all of this is to believe that you must respond to all the challenges of life by making internal adjustments, by overcoming your own inclinations, by submitting.

People like my friend—accustomed through buying, selling, and taking drugs and through other illicit behavior to an antagonistic stance toward conventional society—are natural revolutionaries. But because of the remarkable flexibility and resilience of the ideological system, the innate revolutionism of their position is most often undermined. The appeal of drug-taking is very often its "pornographic" content: its naughtiness. If that be accepted, then the choice of action comes to be, as for my friend, between being naughty or not being naughty. The eccentric or anti-social or revolutionary character of drug-taking is thus obscured by the acceptance of the standard ideological belief about it, and the individual is again put into conflict only with himself.

As long as the ideological system is able to invest so many kinds of illicit behavior with this kind of pornographic aura, it will be able to defuse a great deal of the antagonism of its natural enemies. And great numbers of people living, as it were, on the wrong side of the law, instead of becoming revolutionaries, will be misled into a choice between enjoying or refraining from certain kinds of behavior on the basis of their naughtiness, while the basic assumption—that society has a legitimate interest in making the kind of moral judgment that acts to enforce this choice—remains unchallenged.

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