

Rebel with a Prescription: Eminem, or America on Drugs

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Eminem, like millions of Americans, just strolls down to his local pharmacist. Thus at a time when the country is questioning its future state of health, the inspired artist exposes the hidden panacea of American society and throws a glaring spotlight on the issue of drug addiction in America today.

A few months ago, Eminem, one of the most surprising artists in the United States today, released his new album *Relapse*. The subject matter is apparent from the cover: Eminem's face is decorated with hundreds of multicolored antidepressant tablets (Ambien, Valium, Seroquel, Xanax, Lunesta, Percodan, Vicodin, etc.). To be sure, they are reminiscent of the playful M&M's candy from which the rapper gets his name, but their seductiveness and anodyne appearance act as bait, as Eminem goes on to describe. The lyrics are the story of his long journey through a narcotic underworld, beginning with the violent death of his best friend. In 2006, after years of chronic but comparatively controlled drug addiction, Eminem sank into the depths of the clinical beyond, the mescaline of modern-day America: an ever-increasing prescription of anxiolytics – a curse prescribed in the name of a refusal of pain and misused by the patient in the name of a refusal to live in the world as it is. It would appear that the tortured rapper thus immersed himself in a willingly decadent rock and roll world in which a doomed artist can only live and be creative when in a chemically-induced trance – a world whose spirit still lives on in America.

Thus, while we celebrate the anniversary of 1969 – the ultimate year of dissent – Woodstock stands as a memorial site, the idealised metonymy of a decade; and yet we forget that at the end of the decade three of its heroes, Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison, all died of a drugs overdose within a few weeks of each other.¹ Two years earlier, Lou Reed's prophetic song "Heroin" became the ambiguous anthem of those for whom drugs meant "death" as well as "women and life". This use of psychedelic drugs by a predominantly

¹ Hendrix died on 18 September 1970; Janis Joplin on 4 October 1970; Jim Morrison on 3 July 1971.

white youth differed from the drug addiction which, as a result of poverty and violence, devastated some of the most fragile social groups for decades – notably the black community – as tragically demonstrated by the well-known fate of stars such as Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Marvin Gaye, Ray Charles and Whitney Houston. “Choosing”² to live “as a poet”, more often stoned than straight – and thereby find an answer to the existential angst established by others of their kind – was the expression of a “white blues” shared in particular by the crowds of acid-takers who gathered in August 1969. For those in favour of this *political* use of drugs, a tool like any other in a revolutionary arsenal, it was not a question of voluntary alienation so much as a criticism of the gagging order imposed by those in power. The drug takers’ stance was thus one of dissidence: “Fuck it!”³

While the spirit of civil disobedience has remained unchanged from the hallucinogenic pilgrims of Woodstock right through to Eminem, Eminem’s pharmacopoeia is drastically different: antidepressants, anxiolytics and legal painkillers have replaced the marijuana, barbiturates and cocaine of the past. This substitution may come as a surprise. If LSD became the most popular drug among young people in the years after it was banned, it was precisely because it became illegal and therefore subversive. Buying or using these drugs could mean going straight to prison. Eminem, like millions of Americans, just strolls down to his local pharmacist. So what is the point of a rebellion with a prescription?

Thus at a time when the country is questioning its future state of health, the inspired artist exposes the hidden panacea of American society and throws a glaring spotlight on the issue of drug addiction in America today.

“Perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart” (Edgar Allan Poe)

Before being associated with the underground world of New York musicians in the interwar years, the Beat generation of the 1950s or the anti-authority movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s, the use of psycho-active substances to express one’s tortured self to the world was one of the key devices of European romanticism of the early 19th century. Taking up so-called “ancestral”, exotic practices, many artists experienced trances and madness: the true poet “drinks his merriment, smokes his oblivion, and eats his madness,” as Théophile Gautier wrote in 1843.⁴ There is a long list of painters and poets who developed a drugs aesthetic –

2 While one of the underlying ideas in this article is that drug use can be understood as a “rebellion”, it is in no way intended to “romanticise” or vindicate addictions that may result from despair or poverty. We are referring to the “poetic” use of substances.

3 Eminem expresses a similar sentiment: “Fuck off”.

4 “Le Hashish”, La Presse, 10 July 1843. French quote (“boit de la gaîté, fume de l’oubli, et mange de la folie”) in Michel Hautefeuille, *Dopage et vie quotidienne*, Payot, Paris, 2009. Translation based on that found here: <http://www.rexresearch.com/hhist/hhist1~1.htm#refs>

always closely linked to the violation of a prohibition – and thereby concealed themselves as loners and outlaws.⁵ Often presented as a form of dandyism, it was a wide-ranging movement – a product of the French Revolution but lasting until the First World War – that turned personal hallucination into a retreat and an alternative to life within a society. Dissident America has been profoundly influenced by this form of poetic dissidence and, while Eminem’s work and life express the way in which he is instinctively rooted in African-American cultural tradition,⁶ they are also distortions of that European – and, more precisely, Anglo-Saxon – Romantic literary trend.

With a certain degree of historical coincidence, *Relapse* was released during the bicentennial year of the birth of Edgar Allan Poe, whose work was characterised by the theme of duality and the terrifying presence of the murderous instinct within man who is driven by his unsuspected demons. Drugs are therefore the ambiguous medium that enables him to access his alter ego. In many of his songs, Eminem places himself in a horrifying, pseudo-gothic world that brings together sardonic laughter, bloody murder and dramatisation of the obscurity in which modern man is doomed to make a pact with the devil.

For Eminem, hell on earth is the deserted streets of his adopted city: Detroit, the underground of a decaying America where the socially excluded live. A landscape of industrial ruins and the very site where the American dream promised by the giant car manufacturers evaporated, it is a twilight zone much like his mind. A child of the most segregated city in the United States, fatherless and raised by a drug-addict mother, he attempts to personify – as Russian dolls – the decadence of his family, the white underclass, his city and the underbelly of society. The opening text of his “Beautiful” video, filmed entirely within the apocalyptic realms of the capital of Michigan, recalls how the city was once “the greatest manufacturing city in the world” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfnmCOUieLw>). The vision he puts forward of his world is governed by anxiety. When he calls Detroit “Amityville,” a reference to the horror film depicting an apocalyptic beyond in which human zombies are reduced to mere shadows, he offers a powerful critique of social reality in the 21st century, even more so given that he does not observe the rules of an exact representation of reality.

In order to survive in this absurd world of trickery and dehumanisation, Eminem’s answer is to re-establish oddity and the full enjoyment of his private inner world. In his

⁵ Absinthe, seen as a muse, seduced [Apollinaire](#), [Alfred Jarry](#), [Edgar Allan Poe](#) and [Oscar Wilde](#). For cocaine use we should name [Arthur Conan Doyle](#) and Robert Louis Stevenson; for hashish and opium, [Baudelaire](#), [Rimbaud](#) and [Verlaine](#); heroin was a companion to Klaus Mann and [Hubert Selby Jr.](#) LSD influenced the careers of [Burroughs](#), [Ginsberg](#), [Aldous Huxley](#) and [Tom Wolfe](#). Most of those who took mescaline wrote of their addiction: Carlos Castaneda, [Henri Michaux](#), [Jean-Paul Sartre](#), [Hunter S. Thompson](#), [Boulgakov](#), Burroughs and [Nabokov](#) can be included among those writers who were addicted to morphine. Quoted in Joseph Vebret, *Friandises littéraires*, Ecriture, 2008.

⁶ See Sylvie Laurent, “Eminem, la rage du pauvre blanc”, *Homérique Amérique*, Le Seuil, 2009.

previous work, his drug abuse, initiated during his teenage years, was a burlesque pathology whose grotesque, terrifying manifestations were transcribed for his public's enjoyment. For only when he was high on drugs could his exuberance be fully conveyed. In *Relapse*, we encounter the usual waywardness of a merry, outrageous prankster deriding the artificial fame of starlets sold as consumer products. Mockingly, he does not hesitate to place himself at the centre of this carnivalesque condemnation of the artifices of the modern world (See "We Made You": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15L7I2ExAJY>). Dressed up, playing the fool in every scene, he is the farcical minstrel, the desperate kind of drunkard who keeps everyone entertained. In "We Made You", he mimics the naïve: "*Ha! Marshall you're so funny man, you should be a comedian, god damn / Unfortunately I am, I just hide behind the tears of a clown*".

His zany interpretation of a Beckettian clown's character is therefore his principal mask and his morbid drug addiction is a secondary disguise. Only pills provide him with this metamorphosis and thus ataraxia – an indifference to suffering in the world. Both sandman and serial killer, he turns America into a circus, a ghastly mockery. His immense talent paves the way for his clownish subversion of the rules of polite society, guaranteeing him phenomenal success in a music industry that would never have bet a dime on a white rapper's chances of success.

He may well be a white rapper but he is creolised by his immersion in black culture, from which he borrows irony and a taste for music hall; to this he adds the racist backdrop of white society. Since he is utterly insane, he can reveal his family secrets. It is even more surprising that he offers the middle classes a caricatural incarnation of their social fantasies that, although taboo, continue to structure his lyrics. He thus transposes the southern myth of the savage black man raping white women onto his character who, as night falls, indeed rapes and murders innocent blonde women. In between crimes and laughs, he swallows a cocktail of all the drugs available on the market. Given that the dropouts of his genre are told they should be ashamed of being even more degenerate than the blacks, he plays with the most pathetic form of sordid realism, of the kind that makes people feel uncomfortable. The self-righteous call the socially excluded "crazy"? Then he will play the insane guy. They call the little white slum guy "trash" and the drug addict a "junkie" (both clear references to waste), so Eminem proudly presents himself as the most toxic piece of American scum. Thus begins the song "Crack a bottle" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uolqQsQplB0>):

"Ladies and gentlemen / The moment you've all been waiting for / In this corner: weighing 175 pounds, with a record of 17 rapes, 400 assaults, and 4 murders, the undisputed, most diabolic villain in the world: Slim Shady!"

In his lyrics and videos, he is the possessed man, the monster and the barbarian, that mysterious being who terrifies the readers of Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Laughter often gives way to terror: the rapper's imaginary escapes tell of bloody murders he commits when he becomes Mr Hyde. In his song "3 a.m.," he sings about drugs and his killer's instinct:

At the Ramada Inn / Holdin onto the pill bottle then / Lick my finger and swirl it round the bottom / And make sure I got all of it / Wake up naked at McDonalds / With blood all over me / Dead bodies behind the counter / Shit, guess I must of just blacked out again / Not again!" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMrBcVx33Ek>)

Even though he is not a child of the middle classes like the Paris "Hasishchins", he claims that using drugs is a "potentialization of creativity", a subject that lies "at the heart of the cultural production of the American underground"⁷ whose moribund, de-industrialised spaces provide the main backdrop.

Mushrooms in Culture⁸

At the beginning of the 1950s, a new generation of anti-authority Americans was seeking to establish drugs as a tool for personal freedom and moral dissidence. Rejecting the subliminal ruses of social domination, they became deviants and outcasts of their own free will. Against the subjugation faced by the young middle classes, the poets Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsburg and, on the fringes, William Burroughs and Aldous Huxley, pitted restless wandering, bohemia, Benzadrine and, above all, writing and music. Well before it was associated with the California hippy movement, the psychedelic attempt to survive in the world by altering one's perception of it was the quest of a generation that was suffocating in Eisenhower's glorious post-war period. Hallucinogenic mushrooms (especially psilocybin) and the mescaline used by native Central Americans (peyote) were, along with hashish and marijuana, the main ingredients of the counter-cultural revolution. In his 1954 book *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley, fascinated by the work of the Romantic painter William Blake,⁹ describes his semi-mystical experiences on mescaline, which he then followed with LSD in order to achieve an even greater high.¹⁰

In 1959, Ken Kesey (author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and other works) also discovered the illicit LSD trip and, along with a group of friends they called the "Merry Pranksters," decided to take the *delirium tremens* to the limit, organising so-called "acid test" evenings, despite the malevolent surveillance of Edgar Hoover's FBI. A few years later, Timothy Leary, a young Harvard graduate, suggested establishing LSD use as a means of

7 Patrice Pinell and Markos Zafiroopoulos « Drogue, Déclassement et stratégies de disqualification », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1982, Volume 42 pp. 61-75. Translator's own translation.

8 Title of an article by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale II*, Plon, 1973.

9 The painter's libertarian "madness", an act of pure rebellion, "inspired, in turn, the Beat Generation (1), Dylan, Morrison, Patti Smith, not forgetting Jim Jarmush's 1995 film *Dead Man*". Translation of Dominique Poiret, *Libération*, 30/04/09.

10 After reading this work, the ill-fated singer Jim Morrison decided to call his band "The Doors".

collective psychological liberation; his 1964 work *Flashbacks* became the bible of the entire psychedelic movement, symbolising the avant-garde of 1960s dissent. Taking hallucinogenic drugs made a mockery of the great “pharmacological Calvinism” requiring that a good – American – Christian withstand the pain and even find salvation in it. The post-war generation wanted to enter into communion with the cosmos, re-order the world and laugh. This was the ideal expressed unequivocally by Joni Mitchell: *Acid booze and ass/ Needles guns and grass/ Lots of laughs...lots of laughs.*¹¹

Displaying one’s torment was, in the Romantic tradition, a vital part of the poetic and moral revolution that had been taking place for a decade. The body was revealed to its full potential and hallucinogenic trips were on a par with sexuality: libertarian experiences to reveal and talk about. In the year that *Flashbacks* was published, the same year that Lyndon Johnson was elected, the poet William Burroughs published *Junkie*, which describes his experiences on heroin. Five years later, he wrote his most famous text *Naked Lunch*; these texts serve as enlightening “sub-texts” that help put *Relapse* into context. Unwittingly, Avital Ronell gives the crucial reason when she emphasises that “*Naked Lunch* evinces a similiar collapse of the boundary between obscenity and drugs”.¹² Indeed, burlesque and zany, Eminem’s work, like that of Burroughs, is characterised by a conviction that the world is a carnival, a huge farce, and that the only reality is the one those in power suggest we believe. Therefore we must not hesitate to shout out – using every swear word under the sun – that we are not fooled, even if that means shocking the middle classes. Certain lines written by the 1950s poet could be those of the rapper: *Entrez, entrez trouducs et trouduchesses, et amenez vos petits trous, un spectacle pour les jeunes et les vieux, les belles et les bêtes, seul et unique au monde !*¹³ Only drugs and a detachment from the body will allow a restructuring of social behaviour and the “new man” of the current revolution.¹⁴

From Burroughs and his contemporaries Eminem also borrows the idea that there is no worse or sicker drug addict than America itself. The malevolent virus that corrupts reason is inoculated by society through media brainwashing and political lies. Eminem, sober for a moment, is undeniably a dissident troublemaker for the modern day; it is symptomatic that his descent into hell corresponded with George Bush’s interminable second term. The Detroit

11 Quote from Nicholas Knowles Bromell *Tomorrow Never Knows Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s*, University Of Chicago Press 2002.

12 *Addict, op. cit.* Translator’s note: Original English taken from *The Über Reader, Selected Works of Avital Ronell*, p132:

<http://books.google.com/books?>

[id=8lmhcLxACusC&printsec=frontcover&dq=selected+works+of+Avital+Ronell&ei=aWTUSuPBOZvmygSIsP3eCQ#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=8lmhcLxACusC&printsec=frontcover&dq=selected+works+of+Avital+Ronell&ei=aWTUSuPBOZvmygSIsP3eCQ#v=onepage&q=&f=false)

13 Translation into French by P.Y. Pétilion. *Histoire de la littérature américaine, 1939-1989*. Éditions Fayard, Paris, 2004, p. 270

14 See the essential work for dissidents of the time: Charles Reich’s, *The Greening of America*, Random House, 1970 :

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/images/0394427300/ref=dp_image_0?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books

rapper has always presented the former president as the evil force that stole America's soul.¹⁵ He takes up the tradition of the famous taunting of the Johnson years. "Hey, hey, LBJ, How many boys have you killed today?" or Dylan's *Mr Jones*.¹⁶ In 1967, Norman Mailer said fearfully that LSD "bombed the past." The drug was nicknamed the "atom bomb of the mind": the only painkiller that could silence the napalm bombings in Vietnam.

In the same vein, Eminem's lyrics evoke the lethal madness of the country's leaders, this time in Iraq. At the beginning of the 21st century, the majority of the conservative elite condemned his indecency, his excessive forms of expression (sexist and homophobic¹⁷; above all, however, they reviled his anti-Bush diatribes). His case was discussed at a Senate committee hearing presided over by John McCain, who tried to have him censored.¹⁸ The rapper nonetheless continued to denounce the American pathology: "we're responsible for this monster [Bush], this coward that we have empowered."

Bye Bye Blues!

The shift from LSD to Prozac is one of the most remarkable examples of the prestidigitation of the American partnership between politicians and pharmaceutical companies in recent decades. This transition is the counter-heritage of the 1960s, the authorities' response to the revolt: right at the time of the first stirrings of cultural dissent, the pharmaceutical industry was expanding the prescription of so-called "legal" drugs to overwhelmed parents and overworked employees.

As Andrea Tone demonstrates in her study *The Age of Anxiety*, the sedation of the American people in the 1950s was a carefully calculated operation. The author is right to borrow the name of the poem by W.H. Auden, written in 1948, which described the nuclear age as an "age of anxiety" with people questioning what life could mean from then on. The post-war period was one of confused emotions during which a coalition of politicians and businessmen organised and promoted the democratisation of *homo syntheticus* in order to "calm" agitated minds. According to Andrea Tone, from the Miltown company in the 1950s right up to the pharmaceutical companies of today, the focus has been on encouraging the "therapeutic," mass consumption of drugs. Making skilful use of the legal/illegal dialectic, The United States is most vociferous about the drugs it then churns out on prescription.

¹⁵ See "Mosh":

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOLMVOa0KD8&eurl=http%3A%2F%2Fvideo%2Egoogle%2Efr%2Fvideosearch%3Fhl%3Dfr%26q%3Dgeorges%2520bush%2520jr%26um%3D1%26ie%3DUTF%2D8%26sa%3DN%26tab%3Dwv&feature=player_embedded

¹⁶ In his 1965 song "Ballad of a Thin Man", Dylan addresses a certain Mr Jones who appears oblivious to the country's restlessness and who could be interpreted as President Johnson himself.

¹⁷ Without doubt, Eminem has peppered his lyrics with homophobic insults, leaving people unable to distinguish irony from discrimination. His friendship with the gay singer Elton John, who helped him take care of himself during his descent into his drugs hell, makes his position on this issue even more ambiguous.

¹⁸ See <http://www.livedaily.com/news/1825.html>

Playing with the rules of the game, it makes this contradiction “the very condition for the reproduction of the social game.”¹⁹ Two antinomic trends in drug use then developed in the United States: “artificial paradises” are the expression of a marginality that is both subversive for some and acceptable for others; LSD for the first group and Prozac for the second, but just one word for both: drug.

It would no longer be possible to obtain illegal substances without a prescription. This allowed “the criminalisation of the protest movement led by large sectors of the young population,” while “shaping public opinion” by pairing repressive policies with a “medicalisation of welfare” and a “shifting of guilt”²⁰. If the drug was obtained properly, then the individual was no longer a drug user but a patient. As for the drug addicts, they became more like delinquents than sick people.

Particular groups were then targeted: mothers (who had a duty to keep the perfect family model and the “American way of life” afloat) were the first to be drawn in. Indeed, there was nothing like a little anxiolytic to calm the suburban frustrations of America during the Glorious Thirty. Benzodiazepine became the privileged little pick-me-up of suburban housewives²¹, as sung by The Rolling Stones in “Mother’s Little Helper” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cfQ4O7FSH8&feature=related>), revealing an open secret: their dependence on a tiny yellow pill.

The post-war economic model, which popularised a culture of unrestricted acquisition of goods, reduced psychoactive drugs to a mere consumer product like any other, and contemporary women’s magazines were filled with advertisements for various magic pills²². Every kind of tranquiliser had achieved dizzying success by the end of the ’60s. Effective marketing strategies (the arrival of Valium on the market in 1963, Xanax in 1981 and the infamous Prozac in 1987, nicknamed “BBB” – “Bye Bye Blues”) triggered an arms race between increasingly available legal drugs (following on from women, each sector of the population could obtain a tailor-made prescription) and a population of users who, unlike those of the ’60s and ’70s, did not have the means to access an obliging doctor. In other words, the “calming,” “doping” products with which Eminem numbed his mind are those that were thought to be the antidote to the revolt²³.

19 Patrice Pinell and Markos Zafiroopoulos, article cit. Translator’s own translation.

20 Patrice Pinell, Markos Zafiroopoulos “Drogues, déclassement et stratégies de disqualification”. Translator’s own translation. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1982, Volume 42, p. 61-75.

21 “Valium, the first medication to generate over 100 million dollars, is the secret poison of women who can no longer face life”, Pierre Henri Castel’s website (Translator’s own translation into English).

22 See Choire Sicha, “Sédation Nation”, Bookforum.com, May 2009.

23 In French, we may refer to Michel Hautefeuille, *Dopage et vie quotidienne*, Payot, Paris, 2009.

Although the dissent faded away at the start of the 1970s, the Nixon administration put the finishing touches on a process of prohibition that would make it impossible for people to rebel through drugs. The 1970 Controlled Substances Act required pharmaceutical laboratories to monitor their products in order to avoid any misuse and to establish a strict classification system intended to regulate domestic consumption²⁴. The anxiety of those who were suffering a temporary psychological dysfunction was “treated,” while those who were morally deviant were denounced, for they had broken the law.

The symbolic conflict between these two types of drug use, and the lies concealed in the prohibitionist rhetoric, were spectacularly illustrated in 1973 when Elvis Presley, up to his eyeballs on barbiturates prescribed by his doctor, joined the so-called “war on drugs” campaign waged by Nixon²⁵. Without a second thought, he denounced the “anti-American” actions of the long-haired drug addicts who claimed to be against the establishment. This is an illustration of the true American heartland and its morally corrupt core. From the middle of the 1970s, while the growing poverty of those excluded from the healthcare system exposed the damage caused by hard drugs in the poorest areas of the country, and while liberals were being blamed for the permissiveness that was destroying America, the recreational, committed use of drugs was no longer conceivable. Up until Eminem, there were the respectable drugs taken by housewives and overworked executives, and the ignominious illegal drugs used by every kind of hippy – social misfits who, since the 1980s, *horresco referens*, have included the African-American crack smokers²⁶.

Drug addiction as a metaphor²⁷

We might therefore be led to believe that Nixon’s strategy – the legal enslavement of an entire section of the population – was successful in eradicating subversion and in ridding himself of any future political responsibility for drug use. To be sure, modern-day hippies and rockers use marijuana and cocaine, and a whole range of pills is available to young people looking to get high. Yet (almost) nobody in mainstream American culture publicly brandishes a ganja leaf or proclaims his drugs habit, as the Romantics and the American dissidents did as a way of resisting and insulting authority. The chronic sedation of the middle classes is entirely accepted, indeed, legitimate, which is why no one is concerned that one of the most popular televised series today (both in France and the United States), *House M.D.*, tells of the exploits of a doctor addicted to Vicodin (an opioid derived from codeine), the painkiller also abused by Eminem. The medical community is only just beginning to react to the innocent

24 See Kelly Boyer Sagert *The 1970s American popular culture through history* Greenwood Press, 2007.

25 After meeting the president at The White House in 1970, Elvis wrote to him publicly to express his condemnation of the anti-American drugs culture, promoted by The Beatles in particular: <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aaelvisa.htm>

26 The enforcement policy of controlling the black population through crack would require a separate article. Reference can be made to the work of Loïc Wacquant.

27 Reference to the book by Susan Sontag on cancer, *Illness as Metaphor*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978.

way in which the drug is portrayed in the series²⁸. The United States, therefore, is highly unusual in that it has created thousands of prescription drug addicts, highlighting the worrying indenture of American doctors in drugs laboratories. Housewives' drug abuse is still privileged and, during the last presidential campaign, Cindy McCain was forced to disclose, as Betty Ford once did, that she once suffered a long-term addiction to pills, to the point where she stole them from her charity organisation's medical relief supply²⁹.

The conservative response to the unrest of the 1960s seemed, therefore, to have worked perfectly. The economic crisis at the end of the 1970s and the Reagan administration's rhetoric succeeded in consigning drug addiction to an exceptionable marginality: that of the fringe minorities of real America (blacks, homosexuals and, above all, the poor). At the same time, blameworthy, conditioned mothers became their children's first drug dealers: *Relapse* tells of America's great relapse and the illusive nature of its weaning off drugs: even more so than during the 1960s, America is now a major addict, intoxicated by mothers who have been brain-washed by a narrow definition of morality.

Resuming his well-known questioning of his own decadent mother, Eminem adds that his social and physical depravity is, rather than the fault of his genes, the result of his upbringing. It is his mother, he sings, who gave him sedatives from a tender age in order to calm him down. In "My Mom", (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcpsVvNULwE>), he sings to an almost infantile melody

*My mom loved valium and lots of drugs
And that's why I am like I am cause I'm like her
Because my mom loved valium and lots of drugs*

There is no doubt that Debbie Mathers was addicted to medication and that she must have battled against her addiction for her whole life; Eminem's lyrics describing her as his first dealer seem more justified than most of his usual matricidal excesses. Appearing to have been provoked for the umpteenth time, he brutally exposes a reality silently endured by white Americans of the quiet, modest suburbs. Since the 1980s, it is true that many American mothers have resorted to amphetamines in order to control their children's moods when they are deemed to be hyperactive. Use of the obedience pill, Ritalin, shot up by 600% between 1989 and 1995 and it is estimated that, in some American states, 10-15% of children are thus forced into a chemical straitjacket³⁰.

Today, more than 9.5 million children are treated by the drug and, in many cases, the treatment is complemented with other psychotropic drugs. Without doubt, Eminem's story must strike a chord for a high percentage of the population. It was preceded by that of Kurt

28 See <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/PainNews/Story?id=5841784&page=1>

29 <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/10/18/drugs/>

30 This information on Ritalin is borrowed from M. Hautefeuille, *op. cit.*

Cobain whose band, Nirvana, was hugely popular at the start of the 1990s. The artist, who was consumed by a drug habit and committed suicide in 1994, had also been given Ritalin as a child.

The most remarkable denigrator of middle America is therefore a monster created by America itself; Eminem is the offspring of that generation of women who were put on anxiolytics during the glory years in order to numb their frustration and contain that of their children. Anxiolytics are an antidote to rebellion, they were told; the key that would prevent their children from becoming insolent tearaways.

The rapper thus achieved the amazing feat of incarnating this historical mystification. Turning the weapon of public accusation on himself, he transforms the therapeutic dose into a lethal cocktail. In Eminem, the drug addict becomes a rebel and an anarchist. “It’s no secret I had a drug problem. If I was to give you a number of Vicodin I would actually take in a day? Anywhere between 10 to 20. Valium, Ambien, the numbers got so high, I don’t even know what I was taking.”³¹

In his track “Underground”, Eminem describes his social paralysis, which is that of an entire, broken generation lost in the murky world of idle America. He can express nothing but disgust, anxiety and contempt for a country that looks the other way. In his native Michigan, the enforcement policies of the Nixon and Reagan years brought about a normalization of devastating “home” drugs including, in particular, methamphetamine, which was to poor white groups what crack was to the blacks. Its use then spread like wildfire through the heart of the country. Today it is estimated that 12 million people from the Midwest working classes take this drug, which can be home-produced using fertiliser or detergent³². The new scourge of white, rural America – crystal meth – is the tragic panacea of the washed-up. It is also a tragicomic illustration of public health policy in the United States: the nation fails to take care of its 23 million untreated drug addicts³³, while imprisoning vast numbers of blacks and neglecting poverty-stricken addicts. Domestic drug addiction has reached such levels that a prevention campaign broadcast on American television warns parents: one in five American children has already stolen medication prescribed for his or her parents. Nowadays, people use whatever they find in the bathroom cabinet and certain contemporary artists are famously in danger of overdosing on...cough syrup!³⁴

31 Interview in *Vibe* Magazine, taken from <http://news.softpedia.com/news/Drugs-and-Pills-Almost-Killed-Me-Eminem-Tells-Vibe-Magazine-110806.shtml>

32 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0715/p03s01-ussc.html>

33 See <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/washington-whispers/2009/06/18/advocates-obama-should-treat-drug-and-alcohol-addicts-too.html>

34 Misuse of drugs is such that one of the latest trends is an addiction to cough syrup. Known as “Sizzurp” in the hip hop world, particularly the old south, this concoction containing codeine (as well as hydrocodone and promethazine) has already caused the deaths of several artists and threatened the health of its most famous user today, the rapper Lil’ Wayne.

Eminem is often compared with Elvis and, several times on the album, he identifies himself with the grotesque, drugged star who made “black people’s music”. However, it would seem that their opinions lie at opposite ends of the modern America’s moral spectrum: one falsely denied the country’s addiction while the other gives a hyperbolic, extreme explanation of the vice of an entire generation and its insatiable desire for subversion. America’s mental health is under debate and, for those who have not yet grasped Eminem’s message or are not familiar with his music, *Relapse 2* is due for release on 16 November 2009.

Translated from French by **Susannah Dale**

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