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## The Synanon Fix

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## The Synanon Fix

### Abstract

This is a film review of *The Synanon Fix* (2024), directed by Rory Kennedy.

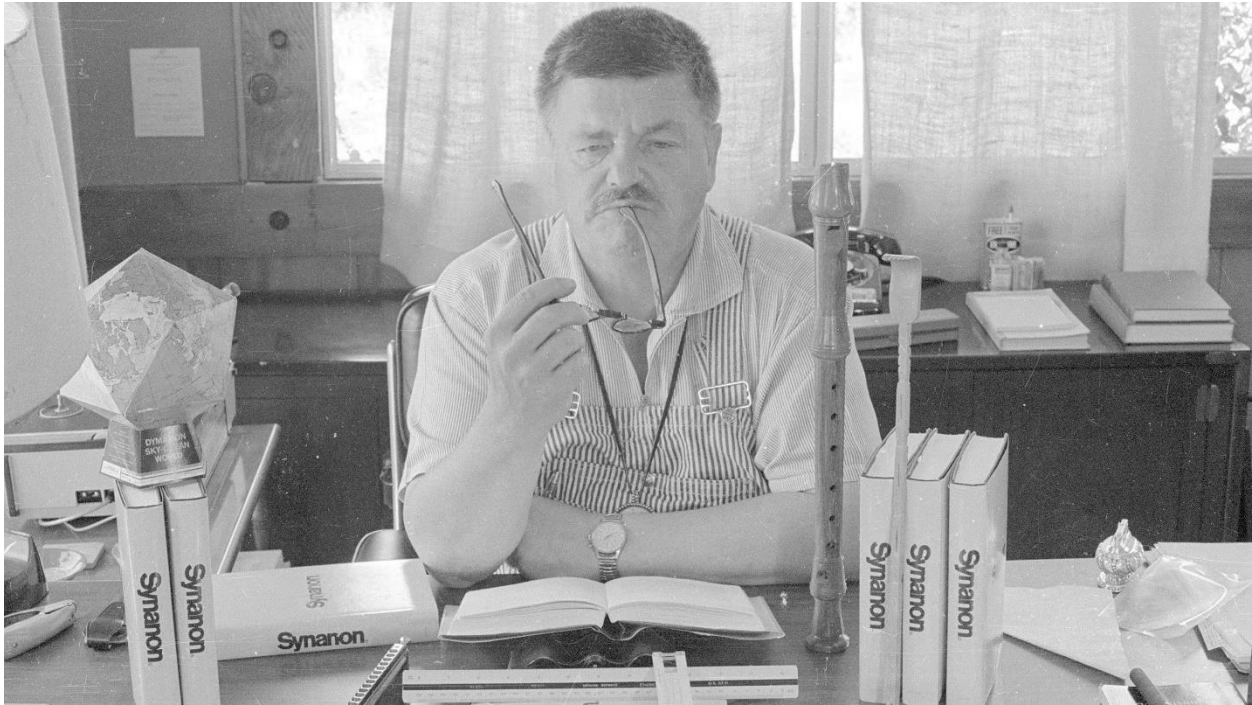
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### Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



**The Synanon Fix (2024), dir. Rory Kennedy**

*The Synanon Fix*, a four-part HBO documentary, the first two episodes of which were screened for Sundance, covers the rise and fall of the extraordinary Synanon movement, which started as a simple yet revolutionary lay residential alcohol and drug treatment group in Los Angeles in 1958 and morphs throughout the decade of the 1960s into a social movement, then a religion, and finally, many would say, a cult. The first episode, “Here Come the Dope Fiends,” begins with founder Charles “Chuck” Dederich being arrested for murder in 1978, so immediately the viewer knows this story does not end well.

Chuck Dederich was a self-identified alcoholic who began to offer other addicts, primarily heroin junkies, essentially a couch or bed to stay on while they went through the ravages of withdrawal, with only two rules for the residents: no drugs and no violence. What he offered as “treatment” was called The Game, extended periods of direct verbal confrontation with the other residents, the philosophy being that addicts were unable to access emotions and turned to drugs to

numb their feelings of rage, fear, despair, and so on. The series of first-hand accounts by the original Synanon members testify to the effectiveness of this approach, many of whom state that they would likely be dead without it. Finding recovery in the community setting and *The Game*, Chuck dissuaded anyone from leaving the group, and most agreed that their best chance at a full life was within the confines of Synanon. (Curiously, the name doesn't actually mean anything: it is a semi-amalgam of words like "symposium" and "seminar" plus "anonymous.")

Synanon's successful treatment of addicts necessitated two things: more space and donations to support the work. Chuck pushed the residents into "The Hustle," in which they would go to companies and other organizations, present their miraculous story of liberation from addiction, and ask for donations to continue to help others. This altruism eventually extended to people who worked outside of Synanon donating their own salaries and even whole businesses and facilities. Soon Synanon moved out of L.A. to the beaches of Santa Monica, attracting the curiosity and attention of non-addicts, known as Lifestylers, who joined Synanon just to enjoy the community and the emotional exhilaration of *The Game*.

By the time the second episode begins, Synanon is so successful from the influx of Lifestylers and their money that the organization's focus shifts almost entirely away from the original purpose of ending addiction and the people it had been created for. The first members, who had really co-created Synanon with Chuck, felt excluded from the direction that the organization was heading and gradually started leaving. Meanwhile, Chuck found he had unwavering devotion from the Lifestylers and virtually unlimited financial resources, a recipe for a "cult leader" if there ever was one. Of course, what defines a "cult" is a hotly contested issue. My 2005 book with W. Michael Ashcraft, *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*, lays out five intersecting "nexuses of novelty," whereby an emerging religion may offer something "new" to prospective members. Of course, in this regard, religious movements overlap a great deal with political and social movements. Once Synanon relocated its operations to Santa Monica, it

was definitely a social movement with some political aspects, mainly due to the strong opposition by local residents to their presence there—not only because at the time the group was made up largely of recovering drug addicts, but even more so that it was fully racially integrated. Chuck, in fact, married Betty Coleman, a Black woman who was one of the first to join the group and who partnered with him in running the organization (and who was portrayed by none other than Eartha Kitt in the 1965 film *Synanon*, an admiring fictionalized portrayal of the origins of the group). This turn toward social transformation through modeling racial integration suggests that Synanon offered a “New Society,” in the terminology of our NRM “nexuses of novelty,” but just as important were the social and personal benefits the members derived from communal living, offering them a “New Family” to which members interviewed for the documentary refer outright.

At its height in the mid-1960s, Synanon seemed to have tapped into the secret to solving many of the problems that plagued American society, and it enjoyed widespread, mainstream, bipartisan support. It expanded operations across the US, linked together by a private radio frequency called “The Wire,” a 24-hour broadcast of Game sessions and, most importantly, Chuck’s constant thoughts and proclamations. With this innovation, it becomes clear that Synanon is whatever Chuck wants it to be at the moment. When Chuck quits smoking, cigarettes are banned. When Chuck wants the children of Synanon members raised collectively, Israeli *kibbutz*-style, parents give up their kids to be raised by appointed group members. Unsurprisingly, as Synanon grew and fell away from its original mission, it became vulnerable to pushback, particularly in the form of a 1972 San Francisco *Examiner* exposé that asserted that virtually no addicts were being treated and that the entire operation was a scam to separate well-meaning people from their money. Such an accusation jeopardized Synanon’s non-profit status, which prompted two immediate responses: first, Chuck sued the *Examiner* for libel, for which he won a \$600,000 settlement (and which became the model for a new revenue stream for the organization), and second, Chuck realized that the new Synanon was vulnerable as long as it was legally defined by its old mission,

and so he began taking steps to transform the group into something with broad protections in American society: a religion.

The Synanon story uncannily parallels two notorious religious movements—or, some would say, “cults”—in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, both with their own California connections. The first, Peoples Temple, was started by Jim Jones as a racially-integrated Christian social improvement organization in Indiana but moved to Ukiah, California in 1965, largely with a focus on criminal justice and help for addicts. We all know the tragic end result of Jones’s increasing paranoia, messianic delusions, and control over his church. Significantly, Peoples Temple also featured extended “catharsis sessions,” wherein group members would relentlessly subject each other to degrading emotional abuse for the purposes of breaking down individuals’ egos—a method no different in kind from *The Game*, although presents different in result. The other alternative religion that Synanon calls to mind, of course, is the L.A.-based Scientology, which is also ostensibly a therapeutic organization, deriving from L. Ron Hubbard’s “Dianetics” system, but which has also exploited the US legal system around religion to amass a fortune, effectively place itself beyond legal reproach, and wage war against its critics in the media through lawsuits. One might say that the story of Synanon contains the whole of the American era known as “The ’60s” in microcosm, as a group that started as a legitimate response to a dire social need, became a social movement, then a religion, and finally ended in tragedy. The fact that the director of *The Synanon Fix* is Rory Kennedy, the daughter of Robert Kennedy, who perhaps more than anyone else embodied the hope and tragedy of that time, only underscores the power of revisiting this disconcerting chapter of American social history.