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Portraying the alcoholic: Images of intoxication and addiction in American alcoholism movies, 1931-1962

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Background

Around 1980, Pekka Sulkunen, Juha Partanen and others around the Social Research Institute of Alcohol Studies in Helsinki conducted a project on the portrayal of drinking and intoxication in Finnish movies (Partanen, 1980). The project attracted the interest of social alcohol researchers elsewhere; for instance, Sulkunen played a role in stimulating a French project on portrayals in French films (Steudler, 1987). In Berkeley, California, inspired by the Finnish project, Denise Herd and I were the main movers in a group project which set out to study the role of alcohol in American feature films. Our methodology might most kindly be described as "eclectic". We asked film buffs and historians for leads on interesting films. We were interested in normalised as well as in problematised drinking. The normalised drinking was sometimes in the foreground, particularly towards the end of the Prohibition period, but was more often a taken-for-granted part of the background. Indeed, we found that film buffs, working from memory, could much more readily guide us to films with problematised than those with normalised drinking. We examined indexes, plot summaries, reviews and content analyses, as well as some of the enormous hagiographic literature on filmmakers and films; we made detailed notes on films as and after we watched them; Herd also undertook a more formal, shot-by-shot analysis of a few films. As a way of pushing the enterprise forward, we arranged for four evening film programs to be shown under the rubric "Images of Alcohol in American Films" at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley (Herd and Room, 1982).

Looking at American films from about 1910 to 1980 turned out to be a revealing window into the enormous changes in the cultural position and images of alcohol in American society over that period. The movies had both portrayed and played an important role in the “wetting” of America (Room, 1988), as the younger generations of the 1920s and 1930s turned decisively against Prohibition and the temperance movement (Room, 1984). Then, in the period after World War II, movies had brought the concept of alcoholism and images of the alcoholic into the consciousness of Americans (Room, 1989), in a string of “alcoholism” films. Many who worked on the films were from the generations who had grown up rejecting temperance and with a “reverence for strong drink” (Liebling, 1981:667), and the films were often informed by their life experience with their own or others’ issues with drinking as they reached middle age. So the movies were often “problem” films about alcoholism, defined in individualistic terms as a character’s mysterious disorder or failing. But ironically, as Herd showed in a comparison of plots of films in the 1920s and the 1960s, despite the best intentions of advocates of the alcoholism concept, the image of the heavy drinker and his or her fate in the films of the 1960s was actually darker than the image of equivalent characters in the temperance era; in the films of the later period alcoholics tended to be “men and women with deep-seated personality disorders who were doomed to lives of failure and stagnation” (Herd, 1986).

The paper’s focus

This paper revisits some of the material from the Berkeley project, examining in particular the imagery of alcoholism: how alcoholism and the alcoholic’s intoxication were portrayed in American films, and in particular in the “alcoholism movies” (Room, 1989) of the period 1945-1962 – described by Denzin (1991) as the “classic period” of such films.

The alcoholism idea and ideology was a specific formulation of the addiction concept which had become a commonplace idea in English-speaking societies from the 1830s onward. Although advocates of the alcoholism idea in the 1950s saw temperance ideas about alcohol as the antithesis of the idea, it is better understood as a repurposing and renaming of a concept which had antecedents in the temperance movement (Levine, 1978). At the heart of the addiction concept is the idea of a mysterious compulsion which compels the drinker to drink despite whatever troubles the drinking may cause. So the concept is an explanatory concept, not simply descriptive. To say that a person has a habit of drinking heavily is simply describing a drinking pattern; but to say

that the person is an alcoholic is to explain the drinking behaviour – and explain as well why things are going badly in the drinker’s life in general (Room et al., in press).

Ideologists of the nascent “alcoholism movement” (Room, 1983) of the late 1940s and after did not insist that all who drank a lot were alcoholics; in their framing, alcoholics were distinguished from another class of heavy drinker, “plain drunks” (Mann, 1958). Film-makers aiming to express and use the addiction concept in a film’s plot and action had the problem, therefore, of differentiating the alcoholic from a “plain drunk”. In taking on the alcoholism concept, they had set themselves the task of doing so in terms of a mysterious force which had the alcoholic in its power.

Competing images of recurrent intoxication

A portrayal of alcoholism can hardly get by without also portraying intoxication. The problem which faced film-makers wanting to represent the alcoholic in ways responsive to the paradigm and imagery of Alcoholics Anonymous and the alcoholism movement (Room, 1983) was that there were already two archetypal portrayals of drunkenness in American films: the “comic drunk” and the doomed protagonist of the “drunkard’s progress” – the temperance melodrama. Neither of these portrayals fitted the image of the drinker which an alcoholism movie typically wanted to convey. But there were audience expectations set by the two archetypes with which the films had to deal, either by careful avoidance or by acknowledgement and adaptation.

The comic drunk

The “comic drunk” was a well-recognized stage and literary stereotype which reached back well before the inception of the movies (see Stivers, 1976, pp. 146-149, 155-159; Silverman, 1980). As Silverman notes in a discussion of pre-1919 film comedies,

Americans through the years have loved to laugh at the boozier. His misadventures, his staggers, his rolling and reeling, his pratfalls have all caused the public to laugh heartily. The screen and stage drunk is a staple figure of fun from Rip [van Winkle] down to Charlie [Chaplin]. Whether he is outwitting his wife who is presented as a killjoy or enjoying and evening on the town with a buddy, he gains the sympathy of his audience who tend to regard him with friendly indulgence. (Silverman, 1980:288).

In the hands of comic actors such as Charlie Chaplin, drunkenness often has a balletic grace, and the drunk acquires the power to perform feats which would be impossible while sober (see for instance Chaplin in One a.m., 1916, and Hardy in Laurel and Hardy's Kidnapped, 1938). Common conventions in the comic portrayal of drunkenness include a wobbly walk (Chaplin's The Cure, 1917) and staggering (Arthur, 1981), problems in focusing on a person or object (Red Skelton in Ziegfeld Follies, 1945; Arthur, 1981), and slurred words and scrambled word order -- in The Last Flight (1931), the excuse offered for mixing up names is that "it was on account of the Picon Citron". Comic drunkenness is often portrayed in terms of an elaborately explained but nonsensical logic (e.g., Cold Turkey (1971)). More generally, a drunken person is often immune to the usual conventions of decorum -- singing inappropriately, cackling, or talking too loudly, and so on (Arthur, 1981; Baby It's You, 1983; Lover Come Back, 1961). When the guests at the sanitarium unknowingly drink alcohol instead of water in Chaplin's The Cure (1917), we see them dancing together and necking on the stairs; one man is passed out, and another is tootling a lamp as though it were a trumpet.

The tradition of comic drunkenness has continued in American popular culture, retaining many of its traditional features, despite the best efforts of the alcoholism movement and health promotion campaigns to convey the message that drunkenness is not funny (Finn, 1980).

The drunkard's progress

In the second half of the 19th century, the temperance melodrama became strongly established in American popular media. The model of describing in grisly detail the moral and physical ills and degradation of habitual drunkenness had been established already in the previous decades in such representations as Benjamin Rush's "Moral and physical thermometer" (Rush, 1790), and the widely-distributed Currier and Ives engraving of the "drunkard's progress" through the high life to degradation and death (Currier, 1846). In the temperance melodramas, Silverman notes, "virtue was always rewarded, even if practiced belatedly, and sin punished". For a confirmed drunkard, "the only outcome was death, although salvation could come about through repentance, sudden religious conversion, suffering or the redemptive love of a pure woman or innocent child" (Silverman, 1979). The famous filmmaker D.W. Griffiths made a number of such melodramas as short films between 1908 and 1912. In his film *What Drink Did* (1909),

a happily employed father is lured into accepting the fatal “first drink” by his unsavoury companions. Soon his love of ale and saloon life cause him to neglect his wife and children. In desperation, the agitated wife sends one of the daughters to the tavern to plead with her father to return home. He drunkenly waves her away and knocks her down. The bartender tries to protect the child and gets into a fight with the father. In the ensuing brawl, the child is accidentally shot by the bartender. The child dies in her father’s arms, and he is overcome with horror and remorse... He therefore resolves to never drink again, and embraces his wife and remaining daughter. (Herd & Room, 1982).

Temperance melodramas were a mainstay of longer films, also, until the late 1920s, and the genre never entirely disappeared. Griffiths’ last film, The Struggle (1931), is essentially one such, and The Wet Parade (1932), a curious melange of genres, included three such melodramatic stories. In the changing societal mores, neither of these films drew much of an audience (Herd & Room, 1982).

In their portrayals, temperance melodramas included many visual representations of the horrors of drink. A mainstay was the *delirium tremens* (DTs) attack, as a visual representation of the evil bodily effects of alcohol. Some temperance films – for instance the Ten Nights in a Barroom of 1913 – portrayed alcoholic hallucinations as the drunkard would see them, splicing in shots of writhing snakes (Herd & Room, 1982).

Intoxication and addiction in the alcoholism movies

The alcoholism movies from The Lost Weekend (1945) onward drew selectively on the two already well established codes, but at the same time made efforts to transcend them. Since in the alcoholism framing drunkenness is not intended to be comic, the codes for comic drunkenness seem to have acted as a constraint on the imagery and action, given how well-established they were. Sometimes the presentation of drunkenness in an alcoholism movie plays on the conventions of comic drunkenness, but what follows has turned sour rather than sweet. At the opening of the 1957 A Star Is Born, a drunken James Mason attempts the comic drunk's feats of grace, jumping on the back of a passing horse, and darting on stage for an impromptu song-and-dance duet. But the results are far from graceful: he slides off the horse, and is obviously uncoordinated on stage. It is as if in the comic drunkenness tradition we are seeing the feats as the drunkard would wish them to come off, while

in A Star Is Born we see them through the eyes of a sober observer. Reinforcing this double framing, the audience of A Star Is Born learns that those who have had to pick up after the "likable drunk" have often become immune to his charms: "I got you out of jams 'cause I was paid, not because I liked you". A scene in Smash-Up (1947) is another example where a comic-drunk narrative attempted by the drinker is punctured by sober responses. The alcoholic protagonist comes in, ostensibly from going to the movies, but with an air of drunken insouciance. She's reminded by her husband that she was supposed to get ready to host a party. "Well, in that case, I'd better have a drink". Her husband responds snidely: "Did you run out of double-features?" Ignoring this, the wife replies, "Let's have an old-fashioned -- only go light on everything except the alcohol." Then she ends the exchange by remarking to her husband's friend, "Have you noticed how stuffy my husband's getting about my drinking?"

The big problem that the alcoholism frame presents for the filmmaker is how to convey that the drinker is not a "plain drunk", that behind the repeated intoxication and the adverse consequences is a mysterious driver of the behaviour, so that the actions are compelled rather than chosen by the actor. A straightforward stratagem occasionally used was a "talking head": in Smash-Up (1947), a slightly middle European-accented clinician explains to the main characters in the movie that there is a disease, alcoholism, which is causing all this mayhem. Another approach was through words, in the dialogue, as characters conveyed their perceptions and feelings. Thus in The Lost Weekend (1945) Don exclaims to Helen, his longterm girlfriend, about a drinking bout that he "died this weekend of alcohol and moral anemia, fear, shame and DT's" (Denzin, 1991:50).

Filmmakers also made varied efforts to convey addiction visually and aurally, in images and evocations. In doing this, they often made use of some of the conventions of temperance melodrama – for instance, portrayals of DTs and of hallucinations. Attacks of DTs provided a dramatic set of images in many of the alcoholism films; thus Jack Lemmon, who as a young actor had played in a revival of The Drunkard, the quintessential 19th Century temperance melodrama (Widener, 1975), gives an especially vivid representation of an attack of DTs in Days of Wine and Roses (1963), his first dramatic screen role. Ritson (1979) contrasts the frequency of portrayal of DTs in the alcoholism movies with clinical experience that DTs are "thought to occur in approximately 5% of alcoholics". A reason for the portrayal of DTs, Ritson comments, "may be to convey as tersely as possible that this person's

drinking is different”. More specifically, an attack of DTs also conveys the idea that the drinker’s body is out of control, serving as a visual representation of the loss of control at the heart of the addiction concept. As another way of indicating the drinker’s body is out of control, alcoholism films also continued the tradition of visual representation of hallucinations as they would be seen by the drinker; thus The Lost Weekend (1945) includes a sequence of a fluttering bat devouring a mouse through a hole in the wall.

More directly tackling the addiction concept, filmmakers found ways of symbolising and conveying that a mysterious force was driving the alcoholic’s drinking behaviour. In The Voice in the Mirror (1958) craving is symbolised “both with music and with a visual presentation of the idea that alcoholics don’t drink like other people: a reverent cradling of the drink in both hands, followed by a quick gulp” (Room, 1989). In The Struggle (1931), a transitional film that might be seen as an alcoholism movie *avant la lettre*, Griffiths has the protagonist adopt a special kind of walk, stooped forward; as the drinker moves further into degradation, the stoop becomes more and more pronounced. Often filmmakers drew on the conventions of another genre, the horror movie. In The Lost Weekend (1945), Ray Milland’s eyes start to glow, and eerie music starts to play, as a signal that the alcoholic is about to embark on another round of searching for a drink and self-humiliation. In Smash-Up (1947) and in Written on the Wind (1955), too, ominous music wells up on the soundtrack to symbolise the onset of an alcoholic episode.

Reception and interpretation of the framing and its images

The framing of heavy drinking in terms of addiction – as alcoholism -- went on to become official orthodoxy in the U.S., as epitomised by issuance of a postage stamp in 1981 with the message, “Alcoholism—you can beat it!” But public acceptance of the ideas which the disease concept of alcoholism was supposed to carry in its train was half-hearted at best (Room, 1983). With a couple of exceptions (notably The Lost Weekend), the alcoholism films generally did not draw wide attention or a large public.

Critical reception of the films was often somewhat jaded. Reviewers tended to see the films as simply continuations of the old-fashioned tradition of temperance melodrama: thus, for instance,

- Smash-Up had “more resemblance to ‘The Drunkard’ of ancient memory than to the best film of 1945” (i.e., The Lost Weekend);

- Come Fill the Cup [1951] was a “tongue-parching temperance tale”;
- “we shudderingly watch” the protagonists in Days of Wine and Roses [1963] “suffer, we do not really suffer with them. They are impressive performers in a temperance play, and in the background one senses the tinkle of ‘Father, Dear Father, Come Home to Me Now’.” (Room, 1989)

The critics also often failed to understand or accept the main premise on which the alcoholism framing relied: that a mysterious craving or compulsion explained why alcoholics behaved the way they did. Thus the critics stumbled over the filmmakers’ efforts to convey the idea that the force pushing forward the film’s protagonist and events was a mystery. Instead of being seen as providing an explanation, the framing was seen as a failure to provide a motivation. For instance,

- the *Times* reviewer felt that the “one weakness” of I’ll Cry Tomorrow [1955], “as a psychological study, at least – is its failure to make it seem compulsory that the heroine should take to belting booze”; and
- the reviewer of The Lost Weekend [1945] complained that “the reason for the ‘dipso’s’ gnawing mania is not fully and convincingly explained”. (Room, 1989)

Citing reviews as well of five other alcoholism films, Denzin (1991:49) notes that this “failure to adequately explain the cause” was a “criticism ... brought to bear by critics” throughout the “classic period” of alcoholism films.

Is a naturalistic portrayal possible that distinguishes addiction from the phenomena of recurrent intoxication?

Hollywood films are made with the primary object of attracting and amusing as large an audience as possible. Only secondarily are some made with the intention of persuading the audience or changing their view of a phenomenon or issue. It is clear from biographies and other published material that this secondary motivation was important in the making of a number of the alcoholism films (Room, 1989). The alcoholism movement was clear that it had a tough sales job on its hands in persuading Americans that repeated intoxication was not just a matter of a lack of willpower and morals.

Judging by the skeptical critical responses to and the relatively meagre audiences for most of the films, they turned out not to be a very effective means of persuasion.

Part of the problem can be seen to be the inherently difficult task that is set for the filmmaker by the addiction concept: how does one make concrete and visual or audible that the actions being presented are not just a habit which the characters got into and can get out of, but a compulsion that drives the action and explains it? If the filmmaker tries to do it naturalistically, as with the cradling and gulping of the drink in The Voice in the Mirror (1958), it does not very strongly suggest compulsion. The alternative, to tap into horror movie conventions, comes very close to suggesting possession -- that the drinker has been taken over by an alien spirit. But such a suggestion does not fit very well with the further development of the film's plot, where it usually turns out that the resolution of the plot lies in the world of the ordinary and everyday, and external to the drinker -- in love and family, in pursuing some higher purpose, in a supportive fellowship of comrades. The filmmaker's difficulty perhaps reflects that addiction is ineffable, a concept that cannot be expressed in concrete images which distinguish it from the phenomena of recurrent intoxication which the "plain drunk" would also manifest.

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Glossary of important terms

Addiction concept: The conceptualization of recurrent heavy alcohol or other drug use as being the result of a mysterious impulse or force, and thus being out of the control of the user. The concept is now applied also to recurrent heavy gambling and other behavioral problems.

Alcoholic: A recurrently intoxicated person unable to control his or her drinking and thus his or her life; a term applying the addiction concept specifically to the alcohol consumer.

Alcoholism movement: Starting in the 1940s in the USA, a loose assemblage of academics, nongovernmental organizations and recovered alcoholics campaigning for better societal treatment of alcoholics, including governmental provision of treatment for alcohol problems. Though there were ideological connections and some shared membership with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the alcoholism movement was always distinct from AA, which remained non-political.

Alcoholism movie: a film with the portrayal of an alcoholic's condition, fall and sometimes redemption as a central theme.

Delirium tremens (DTs): an acute episode of [delirium](#) touched off by discontinuation of heavy drinking, and the associated withdrawal symptoms. Symptoms of DTs may include nightmares; agitation; global confusion and disorientation; visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations; fever; and signs of autonomic hyperactivity such as [fast heart rate](#) and high blood pressure. As Ritson (1979) noted, DTs have often been overdramatized in alcoholism movies.

Temperance melodrama: A play or novel portraying the rise and fall of a main character whose drinking causes harm to the drinker and those around him or her. The storyline is often resolved by abstinence and recovery with the help of a wife or family. Such melodramas were a mainstay of persuasional campaigns by the temperance movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.