

**Shifting Perspectives on Drinking:
Alcohol Portrayals in American Films¹**

-- Robin Room
Alcohol Research Group
Institute of Epidemiology and Behavioral Medicine
Medical Research Institute of San Francisco
1816 Scenic Ave.
Berkeley, California 94709, USA

Over the last two years, Denise Herd and myself, along with other staff members and affiliates of the Alcohol Research Group, have begun to study the role of alcohol in American feature films. Our methodology might most kindly be described as "eclectic"; we have asked film buffs and historians for leads on interesting films; we have examined indexes, plot summaries, reviews and content analyses, as well as some of the enormous hagiographic literature on filmmakers and films; we have made detailed notes on films we have seen; and Denise has also undertaken a more formal, shot-by-shot analysis of a few films. As a way of pushing the enterprise forward, we arranged last year for four evening film programs to be shown under the rubric "Images of Alcohol in American Films" at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley (see Herd and Room, 1982).

From the first, we set our sights on the whole field of drinking -- and for that matter abstaining -- as portrayed in the movies, and not only on "alcoholism", "intoxication" or such more limited frames of reference used in previous analyses (Cook and Lewington, 1979; Partanen, 1980). This wider orientation reflects our adherence to a persistent theme in American alcohol social science: that problematic behaviors and conditions can only be fully understood in the frame of reference of normative behaviors concerning drinking (see, for example, Bacon, 1943; Levine, 1981).

For the moment, much of our attention has been directed at the material of the films themselves, trying to get a sense of the broad sweep of consistency and change in the role alcohol

¹Prepared for presentation at a colloquium on "Representations de l'Alcool at de l'Alcoolisme dans le Cinema Français", June 6-7, 1983, Paris, France. Preparation of this paper was supported by a National Alcohol Research Center grant (AA-05595) from the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to the Alcohol Research Group, Institute for Epidemiology and Behavioral Medicine, Medical Research Institute of San Francisco, 1816 Scenic Ave., Berkeley, California 94709. This paper has profited from discussions with Denise Herd. Besides film notes and reviews by Herd and Room, this paper draws on film notes and reviews by Dorie Klein, Carol Ghinger and Monique Cahannes. Our project is also indebted in many ways to William K. Everson for his advice and practical help.

plays in the films. From the point of view both of research interest and of policy relevance, our primary interests in the analysis of films are two: what do they tell us about behavior and beliefs relevant to drinking in the population at large; and what were they teaching the American population (and others, then and now, through rereleases) about such behaviors and beliefs? Analysis of these questions, of course, has to be fitted into an understanding of several related subjects: of the nature, codes and technical limitations and possibilities of film as a medium; of the history of films as an industry and as a mass medium; and of the history of alcohol as an issue in twentieth-century America. Successful films had to appeal to their audience; but the nature of the audience for movies shifted over time -- in summary terms, from a primarily industrial working class audience in the very early years, to a broad appeal including also the middle class by 1920 or so, and to a diversity of narrower segmented audiences after television had taken over the task of serving the broadest possible audience. Furthermore, the films were limited in their content not only by the medium's codes and constraints, their audience's tastes and their creators' imaginations, but also by the threats and realities of a succession of movements and mechanisms designed to censor their content. Even if the full record of films made in this century were available for analysis, we cannot treat them as an unbiased reflection of attitudes and behaviors concerning drinking in the larger society; the picture the films offer is distorted by the perceived preferences of the intended audience, by the characteristics of the creative community making the films, by the demands and proclivities of the medium, and by the threat or reality of censorship. Turning to the movies' teaching function, their effects are limited by what their audiences will pay or choose to see, and by the audiences' comprehension of and receptivity to any messages the films are carrying. Some of the most interesting movies from the point of view of alcohol and films -- e.g., The Struggle and The Wet Parade -- were already out of step with shifts in the cultural climate when they were released; a film which nobody goes to see cannot have much effect on popular behavior or thought.

The broad frame of reference we have adopted has complicated our task, since it means that what we are interested in looking at is often not very identifiable and memorable. In many American movies at certain periods, drinking and even heavy drinking is such a normalized activity that it becomes essentially a background phenomenon: it will not be mentioned in a plot summary, it is not regarded as a master characterization of any character, and it may not register in the mind of the viewer. Despite this, alcohol may still have played an important part in the film -- and the film may well be telling us something about the roles of alcohol in American culture. Consider, as an example, a film which has become a cultural monument in the U.S.: Casablanca (1942). Drinking is unmentioned (unless one counts the mention of Rick's Cafe) in the plot summary and excerpts from four reviews reproduced in Halliwell's film guide (Halliwell, 1979, p. 150). In the coverage of Casablanca in the 1942 Christian Century film ratings, attuned as they were to "unfortunate drinking business", "unnecessary drinking" and the use of liquor to remove inhibitions as a "regrettable device" in other films of the time, drinking is unmentioned -- only the "interesting but unpalatable setting" (Christian Century, December 30, 1942, p. 1634). Yet it is hardly an exaggeration to say this film is drenched with alcohol -- not only literally and incidentally, but also in terms of functional values in the plot and characterizations. Much of the action, of course, takes place in a bar, and the film is filled with champagne and "champagne cocktails". At the beginning, to establish his hard-boiled chivalry, Rick throws a drunken ex-flame out of his bar -- "You've had

enough" -- but makes sure she is escorted home unmolested. Rick himself, when questioned by a German as to his nationality, replies "My nationality is drunk". Much is made of his not drinking with the customers; it's thus a noted exception and mark of respect when he drinks (and pays for the drinks) with Ilse and her husband. As a signal of the unresolved old passion between Rick and Ilse, we see Rick drinking heavily after hours from a liquor bottle; when Ilse comes in, he refers to his drinking ironically, before lashing out at her verbally; the next day he makes a half-hearted attempt to use the drinking to excuse his behavior. Champagne is a symbol of elegance and the good life; thus the flashback to Rick and Ilse's romance in Paris is filled with champagne. The impending end of the good times in Paris is signalled by the couple trying to drink up all the good champagne so none is left for the advancing German army. Conversely, in wartime and in Vichy-controlled Casablanca, to be drinking champagne is a signal of decadence and collaboration. In some ways, the most dramatic symbol of violence in the movie is overturned drinks. This is by no means an exhaustive inventory of alcohol's functions in the movie, but suffices to make the point that significant uses of alcohol in films may easily be overlooked. Thus, while film buffs and historians have been of enormous help to us, we have encountered many surprises -- often, particularly in films made after 1930, in the form of an unexpectedly large role for alcohol in a film. Even since we have embarked on the project, and thus have been especially sensitized to alcohol, it has been my experience that it is easy to miss incidental drinking when one is caught up in the action of the film.

Actually, defining the circumstances in which the drinking in a movie is memorable is in itself an interesting question. We have found that there are just a few categories of American movies which seem to be especially memorable as "alcohol movies" to present-day moviegoers. The most obvious, given currently dominant American assumptions that any discussion of drinking as an issue must really mean alcoholism as an issue, are the "alcoholism movies" of the postwar period (1945-1962). The prototypical response to the statement that we are studying alcohol in the movies is, "Oh, you mean like Days of Wine and Roses and The Lost Weekend". When it is explained that our interests extend beyond alcoholism, film buffs are then likely to mention also the wet and cosmopolitan movies of the early 1930s -- The Thin Man is prototypical here. A third category which soon emerges, but which is less clearly tied to a particular period, is the tradition of portrayals of drunkenness by film comedians -- Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, Red Skelton and so on. Those with a serious interest in film history may also mention the "temperance melodramas" which formed a substantial genre in the early American movies and which continued to be made until the early 1930s. These choices of course in part reflect qualities of the eye and memory of the beholder. But they also seem to reflect the extent to which aspects of drinking are presented as an explicit, conscious and central issue in the movie itself. The movies of these categories are all in some sense self-consciously "about" drinking or drunkenness. Such movies are indeed important, interesting and instructive for our purposes. But they represent only a minority of the whole field of movies which were teaching Americans about drinking -- and from which we can learn something of alcohol's place in American culture.

This paper, then, represents some rough beginnings on making sense of what we have seen on the screen, and in fitting it to its time and place in American cultural and social history. In undertaking such efforts, we are of course not starting from scratch. A variety of different traditions of analysis are relevant to our work -- including literary traditions of analysis, content

analysis, semiotic approaches, and social historical work. Analyses of other aspects of films -- perhaps particularly the many analyses now appearing of the representation of women and gender relations in films -- can help show us how to proceed as well as contribute relevant findings.

But there are also ways in which analysis of the role of alcohol in films poses special problems. Alcohol plays such a protean variety of roles in films that no single frame of analysis will catch them all. Since the roles are frequently linked with each other, the analysis must proceed in multiple frameworks. Let us consider, as an example, some possible meanings and implications of one character's offering another a drink. It may be a signal of good-fellowship -- while holding the implication of eventual ruin (Ten Nights in a Barroom, 1930). It may be a symbol of luxury and the fast life (After Midnight, 1927). It may represent an attempt to teach sophistication to a small-town wife who feels she's losing her husband (Hot Spell, 1958). It may be a self-conscious signal of recognition by parents of their son's emancipation (10 North Frederick, 1958). It may be offered as an anodyne or euphoriant ("You sure are in an uproar. What you need is a drink." "Here, drink this. It'll make you laugh and play like any old thing" -- The Last Flight, 1931). It may serve as a sexual come-on ("I just want you to come over to my place and have a drink together" -- Hold Your Man, 1933; "Look, honey, I've got some hooch"; "How about a little nip together -- just you and me?" -- Blonde Crazy, 1931). That she offers a drink may indicate that a woman is old and emancipated enough to be a potential romantic interest -- in spite of the fact that she's the roommate of the man's daughter (10 North Frederick, 1958). Refusal of a proffered drink may reveal that the disguised refuser is really a woman, and thus put her life and virtue in jeopardy (Beggars of Life, 1928). Refusal or surreptitious disposal of the drink by a bartender may indicate his exploitative attitude as a "pusher" (The Wet Parade, 1932; Ten Nights in a Barroom, 1930). Or refusal may indicate the assumption of an air of superiority and distance ("Never touch it -- alcohol, that is -- in any form" -- A Letter to Three Wives, 1949).

This by no means exhaustive list, concerning but one situation involving drinking, indicates something of the variety of different meanings and significances alcohol can have in delineating character, forwarding the plot, and establishing the ambiance of the film. But it must also be recognized that alcohol is often invoked in more technical functions. As at a party in everyday life, getting a drink may be a convenient and polite way of terminating an interchange. The business of making, pouring or getting drinks thus often serves as a kind of punctuation on the action. A number of movies use the glasses and bottles involved in drinking as a running visual imagery: this focusing in on the materiel of drinking can be seen in Hitchcock's Notorious (1946) and in Humoresque (1946). The fact of drunkenness, craving for drink, or a hangover gives a "naturalistic" cover for narrative and visual devices: for instance, for a flashback that turns out to be just dreamed (The Woman in the Window, 1945), for a nightmare sequence in an otherwise innocent cartoon (Dumbo, 1941), for the introduction of horror-movie beasts (The Lost Weekend, 1945), and for a variety of visual distortions and disorientations (Notorious, 1946; Road to Ruin, 1928; The Struggle, 1932).

In the remainder of this paper, we will first consider some characteristic ways in which alcohol figures in the action and moral economy of American movies. At the present summary level, such a discussion tends to be centered on general patterns which reappear over time. Yet there have indeed been big changes in the portrayal of alcohol in the American movies. We will therefore also focus on perhaps the biggest of these changes, the period when the movies, and

America after them, went decisively "wet".

Drinking Events and What They Portend:

While Denise Herd's paper (1983a) is centered on the macroscopic level of alcohol's role in the overall plot structure of the film -- focusing on the presentation and fate of those who by the 1950s were known as "alcoholics" -- our emphasis here will be more on the microscopic level: what is the immediate meaning and signification of characteristic shots, statements and actions involving alcohol, and what are such sequences taken as implying for the future development of the action?

Drinking potentially produces changes in behavior, provides motivations, establishes character and mood, and has consequences in terms of the particular event in which alcohol is ingested. Thus, after a glass of champagne in Our Modern Maidens (1929), Anita Page snuggles up to Rod La Roque in a gondola, gaily leads him on a chase into the bushes, and ends up spoiling La Roque's wedding by admitting the ensuing pregnancy. The champagne is both a visual symbol of her stepping outside the moral boundaries, and an explanation of the behavior which follows.

But in various ways a character's drinking also has longer-term implications concerning prognosis, character and motivation; drinking is thus potentially also a condition of the character. A major way of summarizing these long-term implications in the postwar era is in terms of the "alcoholism". In terms of this governing image, a history of drinking events predicts future drinking events. The character is seen as not fully and reliably in control of his or her behavior. The character flaw expressed in compulsive drinking predates the onset of drinking, and often relates back to the psychodynamics of childhood. The need for drink becomes a potentially overriding motivation for action, and "explains" behavior which would otherwise be reprehensible. Unless the character quits drinking, he or she will come to a bad end. An extreme version of this image can be seen in The Lost Weekend (1945): it is not the effects of drinking per se but rather the craving for drink which causes Ray Milland to wreak physical and emotional havoc.

This "alcoholism" scenario, however, is not the only available image in American culture which links drinking to longer-term conditions of character or circumstance. In many respects, the "alcoholism" scenario reproduces the earlier portrait of the "drunkard's progress" in temperance melodramas; after seeing Griffith's The Struggle (1932), a colleague remarked half-seriously that the only new element since supplied by the alcoholism movement was a name for the condition. But, as Denise Herd (1983a) demonstrates, there are some crucial differences: the drinking history is attributed to external circumstances in the earlier period, but to intrapsychic forces in the post-Freud era. In Written on the Wind (1955), we can see a third image of the nature of the condition of the heavy-drinking characters: here also the drinking reflects intrapsychic forces and the outcome of deficiencies in genetics or upbringing, but without mention or much evidence of "alcoholism" in the usual sense. While alcohol is the basic plot device which explains bad things happening, the characters simply "always drank too much".

A problem for further analysis is the interplay between the meanings and effects of drinking and drunkenness in the event and alcoholism or drunkenness as a condition. This is a problem also, of course, in everyday life. The legal maxim that "every dog gets one bite" expresses in homely terms the strictest possible solution to the question of when to interpret a pattern of events as a condition: in American liability law, a dog biting a person once means that

the dog now has the character of a "dog that potentially bites people", and the owner becomes responsible for keeping this from happening. Conversely, ties of affection or family or other factors often lead us to "explain away" series of events stretching over years without attribution of a condition: it is a cultural commonplace that a mother should excuse her bankrobbing son as not really bad, but just unlucky or misled.

There are considerable variations over time and genre in American films in the nature and extent of the linkage between drinking events and drinking-related conditions. In comic portrayals of drunkenness, the drunkenness event is usually isolated in time, without much in the way of antecedents or long-term consequences. In Laurel and Hardy's Kidnapped (1939?), Hardy's extreme inebriation does not prevent him from accidentally vanquishing an entire army and thus rescuing the woman in distress. Whether in Chaplin's The Cure (1917) or in the recent movie Arthur (1981), the protagonist's drunken ways do not prevent him getting the woman that he wants in the end. Conversely, both in temperance melodramas and in alcoholism films, there is a sense of gathering doom associated with each drinking occasion. In temperance melodramas, each drink from the first is pregnant with future disaster. In the last remake of Ten Nights in a Barroom (1930), the protagonist at first resists drinking, only going into the bar to fetch the town doctor for his sick daughter. But already at his second drink he's commenting that "the second one is not half as hard to drink as the first one". When he returns home drunk, the mother, Cassandra-like, remonstrates that his father was a drunkard, and that "you can't stop with one or two. You may be a man, but you're a Morgan, and no Morgan won a bout with whiskey yet." In alcoholism-era films, there is less emphasis on the first drink, but a heavy emphasis by all concerned on the implicativeness of any new drinking occasion. Drinking by those seen as afflicted with alcoholism is problematic not so much for what happens in the immediate event as for what it portends for the future.

For female characters, the issue of the implications of the first drink and of drinking is complicated by another strong cultural linkage between event and condition -- the value, still found in many movies of the 1960s, put on a woman's preserving her virginity until marriage. Throughout the period we are examining, alcohol is much more closely linked to sexual behavior in women than in men. In fact, one can often detect an antithesis between drinking and sexual behavior in men. Thus, in Days of Wine and Roses (1962), Joe's drinking is presented as partly reflecting alienation from the duties of his public relations job, which include procuring and "chaperoning" party girls for a client. But while drinking is not associated with sexuality on Joe's part, it is on Kirstie's: her father, explaining his anger, says "she's been gone three days -- went off with another bum. Always another bum." Later, Kirstie acknowledges her drunken alliances: "there were lots of detours, but I never looked at them". Her seduction of her "dry" husband is double-barrelled: "you're too good to have a drink with me. What did they do to you at that AA place, anyway? Aren't you a man any more? Can't you hear a woman calling to you?"

Until the late 1920s, any drinking by a woman is a sign of immorality, and a first drink is often an early signal of perdition. In this, the movies were substantially reflecting the society; certainly, in pre-Prohibition days, respectable women did not drink in public places. Fass notes that it is only at the middle of the decade that drinking joined smoking, dancing and other "symbols of liberation" for 1920s college women (Fass, 1977, p. 317). The prohibition on respectable woman drinking was strong enough to serve as an unquestioned plot device: in Beggars of Life

(1928), Louise Brooks, as an orphan on the lam, disguised in men's clothing in a hobo jungle, is revealed to be a woman when she attempts to refuse a drink of spirits. Associated with the proscription of woman's drinking was the attribution of extraordinary power to small amounts of alcohol. The Road to Ruin (1928), which will end with an assignation with her father and an abortion-related death, starts for the protagonist with one drink, after which (as we see through her eyes) the room immediately goes out of focus. One drink has similar demoralizing powers for Anita Page in Our Modern Maidens (1929), and for Louise Brooks in After Midnight (1927). The convention can be seen still operating in Lover Come Back (1961) -- although Doris Day has to explain that she is tremendously susceptible to alcohol, so that one drink will make her irresponsibly drunk. When she decides that she is going to save Rock Hudson from his feigned inexperience and perhaps impotence, her purposeful march into bed with him includes a pause for a glass of champagne, clearly identified as the instrument of her "surrender".

The Power of Alcohol:

Recent research has taught us that, while alcohol is a psychoactive substance and thus does indeed make us feel different, the demeanor and behavior that results is more a matter of culture, circumstance and personality than it is of any physiological link to behavior (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Room and Collins, 1983). This research undercuts a 150-year-old tradition in American thought, which ascribes a physiological power to alcohol as a disinhibitor -- the conventional language of explanation has been that alcohol depresses the "higher centers of the brain", letting out the animal instincts beneath (Levine in Room and Collins, 1983). While the "disinhibition theory" has primarily been discussed in the context of alcohol's relation to violence and crime, it is clear that in general American culture, a varied and often contradictory assortment of powers to influence behavior have been ascribed to alcohol (Room and Collins, 1983).

In the present context, the actual physiological findings are beside the point. In the words of the sociological dictum, connections that "are defined as real . . . are real in their consequences". The point is, in fact, nicely made in a 1930 Laurel and Hardy movie, Blotto. In this film, Laurel and Hardy scheme to extract Hardy, along with a precious bottle of pre-Prohibition liquor, from under the nose of his harridan wife. But the wife, on to their game, has poured the contents of the bottle down the sink and refilled it with cold tea. Laurel and Hardy go to a nightclub and, none the wiser, proceed to get gloriously and disruptively drunk. Hardy's ears wiggle and eyes flutter as the "alcohol" goes down; he puts a lampshade on his head, and tears the shirt-front off a stuffy waiter. They sober up again when the wife appears and spoils their fun by telling them they have been drinking cold tea.

Hardy's wife's little experiment demonstrates -- even as it subverts -- a cultural ascription of strong powers to alcohol. But looking more widely in American films, we can observe ascribed to alcohol, and apparently coexisting in the same culture, a considerable range in degrees of power and an extraordinary variety of kinds of power to control behavior. In terms of its immediate power to control actions and cause harm, on balance we might say that alcohol has never been so powerful as before Repeal. We have already noted the immediate deliquescence of the morals of young women in some movies after their first drink. But, like all rules on the powers of alcohol, this rule is not invariable. Even in the 1920s, the insouciant heroine of Our Dancing Daughters, without compromising her virtue, sips from each of the champagne glasses

of three young men who come to pick her up, and then toasts herself as someone she's going to have to live with for the rest of her life. Her father, joining in approvingly, remarks that "there's a whole racket of decency in every swallow".

Our Dancing Daughters is using the heroine's drinking as a way of making its point that it's inward virtue that counts rather than outward appearances. The heroine's open drinking in front of her parents is contrasted with the secretive drinking of the "villainess". A drunken but harmless escort offers the latter a drink -- "Lil hot baby, want a cool lil sip?", but adds "I said a sip, not a shower" when she takes a swig. Later, at a party, when she refuses a drink -- "No thanks, I never drink" -- the escort adds, as an aside, "She just inhales". In harmony with the novel moral twist of the contrast, alcohol has little apparent effect on the heroine, while the "villainess" is "disgraced" by her drinking in the climactic scene: she gathers a crowd to witness her attacks on her husband and the heroine, before plunging down the staircase to her death.

In general, as we have noted, alcohol has powerful effects on first-time women drinkers in the 1920s. The heroine of After Midnight (1927), having concluded that virtue does not pay, gulps down her first drink, making a bad face. The alcohol has immediate effects: she makes funny faces, dashes around eating cherries out of everyone's cocktail glasses, takes someone else's drink, becomes grandiloquent, and sets up a game where the women slide astraddle down the staircase banisters. Her virginity is clearly in danger: when her sister makes moves to take her home, a hopeful male protests: "Leave her alone -- she's having a good time". The heroine complains of feeling dizzy, but remains gay and hyperactive as her sister bundles her into a car to drive her home. We may contrast this with the induction to drinking shown in a recent movie, Baby It's You (1983), set in the mid-1960s. Alcohol remains a signal of emancipation, but the link with sexuality is much attenuated. Both the first drink and the first episode of drunkenness for the middle-class heroine are shown. Both occur on double dates, the first while she is in high school and the second while in college. Her reaction to the first drink is limited to a wry grimace. When she gets drunk, it appears purposeful: she is drinking more than her companions. Her voice gets louder and higher in pitch, she is overly vivacious and her conversation rambles. Abruptly she feels sick and throws up on the floor next to the diner booth. She conventionally and successfully defends her virginity, under pressure from her high-school boyfriend; when they eventually sleep together, after she's in college, there's no sign of a connection with drinking.

The power ascribed to alcohol to alter behavior and control action varied a great deal in the movies of the 1920s. We learn that The Goose Woman (1925) drinks a lot from a shot of a pile of empty bottles outside her window, from her actions in hiding liquor bottles, and from a newspaper headline, but it would be difficult to discern it from her behavior; she is certainly disheveled, but little evidence is offered us of direct effects of her drinking on her behavior. Even within the same film, there might be no consistent pattern: while it is a glass of champagne that starts Anita Page's character down the road to disgrace in Our Modern Maidens (1929), other characters drink throughout the movie either with no discernible effect or in association with general high spirits. This pattern of inconsistency continued in many of the movies of the 1930s: in Night after Night (1932), the scorned former lover of the gangster hero, Mae West, and a governess all get quite drunk, but alcohol does not appear to have much effect on the upper-class girl who ends up with the gangster. On the other hand, copious quantities of alcohol appear to have very little effect at all on the "lost generation" American ex-pilots who drink their way

through Paris in The Last Flight (1931): other characters keep saying that they are drunk, and calling them "silly drunks", but their mood stays one of boisterous bonhomie whether they are drinking or not. Likewise, the hero of The Thin Man (1934) seems totally unaffected by the small lake of alcohol that he consumes in the course of the film.

Many examples can also be found in postwar movies of characters whose behavior is apparently unaffected by their heavy drinking. The hero of The Lost Weekend (1945) displays very little effect of his actual drinking on his behavior: it is the craving for drink that drives him to frenzy. The characters of A Delicate Balance (1975) drink all the time, and the drinking does allow the expression of feelings and release of tension, but no character ever appears drunk. On the other hand, in other movies alcohol is presented as very powerful stuff. In Lover Come Back (1961), pills which are "the equivalent of a triple martini" are powerful enough to scatter a committee's members to the four winds: one is found "barricaded in the men's room", one "was dancing with the Rockettes" in New York, one "was washed up on the beach in Waikiki", and one was best man at another's wedding. Drinking serves as the explanation and motive force for the whole gothic plot of Written on the Wind (1955).

Movie presentations of drinking are often particularly unrealistic about the fact that alcohol is only slowly eliminated from the body. Many examples can be found of a character who is quite drunk in one scene, but miraculously sober in an immediately following scene. A striking example is the hero of White Shadows of the South Seas (1928). At one moment, he is presented as "a derelict of the seven seas", a drunken bum who cadges drinks, cannot pour steadyhanded, and puts an unwanted hand on a woman. The next moment, hearing of a medical emergency, he vaults over the verandah railing, and trots off steadily to take charge of the situation.

The Portrayal of Drunkenness:

Perhaps the most enduring tradition in the presentation of alcohol on the screen is the "comic drunk", a well-recognized stage and literary stereotype which reaches back well beyond 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. Tipsiness in the comedies is usually of a periodic or binge character and is meant to be hilarious. Drink is seen as a delightful means of escape from a female-dominated world. It brings good fellowship and impulse release. (When women get drunk, by chance, they too become fun-loving and less formidable and fearsome.) . . . The drunks in the comedies are not real drunks. Members of the same audience when confronted with the genuine article would cross the street, walk hurriedly by, fish a dime out of their pockets or in some cases, summon the police or an ambulance. The last thing they would do is laugh. (Silverman, 1980, pp. 288-9).

The tradition of comic drunkenness continues to the present in popular culture, retaining many of

its traditional features, despite the best efforts of the alcoholism movement to convey the message that drunkenness is not funny (Finn, 1980).

In the hands of comic actors such as Charlie Chaplin, and before him Max Linder, 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 Kidnapped, 1939?). 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 (Ziegfeld Follies, 1945; "It was on account of the Picon Citron", excusing mixing up names -- The Last Flight, 1931). Comic drunkenness is often portrayed in terms of an elaborately explained but nonsensical logic. When Dick Van Dyke, as the local preacher in Cold Turkey (1971), attempts to persuade a woozy drunk to give up smoking, the drunk earnestly explains why he cannot:

I'm going to confess something. I tipple -- I mean I drink all the time -- I can't stop drinking, see? I will always drink. If you can understand that, you can also understand that my drinking is directly connected to my smoking. There's a physical thing that directly connects from my liquor buds in my mouth to my smoke pouch in my lungs. You're going to have to physically cut that thing, Reverend -- and if you do that, my head will fall off.

More generally, a drunken person is often immune to the usual conventions of decorum, singing inappropriately, cackling, talking too loudly, etc. (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.

In movies where drunkenness is not intended to be comic, there are not so well established codes of presentation. It is possible that the code for comic drunkenness here acts as a constraint: in a territory of behavior where there is such a well-established code, moviemakers may have been concerned to avoid any possibility that audiences would see the behavior as humorous. Certainly some aspects of the presentation of drunkenness in serious contexts seem to play on the conventions of comic drunkenness. 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 sour: 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. In this movie, we discover that those who have had to pick up after the "likable drunk" may have become immune to his charms: "I got you out of jams 'cause I was paid, not because I liked you".

In various films we can see the trait of immunity to decorum picked up, but often with strong negative reactions by sober participants in the scene. The protagonist in Griffiths' The Struggle (1931), coming in drunk to his sister's engagement party, talks inappropriately, accidentally pulls down the party decorations around his head, and acts over-familiarly towards his boss, sitting him down forcibly twice and patting him on the cheeks. The results are disastrous, both for his job and for his sister's marriage. In Smash-Up (1947), the wife comes in, ostensibly

from going to the movies, but with an air of drunken insouciance. She's reminded that she was supposed to get ready to host a party. "Well, in that case, I'd better have a drink". "Did you run out of double-features?" "Let's have an old-fashioned -- only go light on everything except the alcohol." She ends the exchange by remarking to her husband's friend, "Have you noticed how stuffy my husband's getting about my drinking?"

In serious contexts, the walk of drunk characters is often a deliberate and stiff-legged stagger, rather than Chaplin's loose-jointed wobble. Sometimes horror-movie conventions are invoked -- in Smash-Up (1947) and in Written on the Wind (1955), for instance, our tensions are raised about where the deliberate progress will lead, and ominous music wells up on the soundtrack. In The Struggle (1931), Griffiths has the protagonist adopt a special kind of walk, stooped forward; as the drinker makes his way down the social ladder, the stoop becomes more and more pronounced.

A frequent mode of representation of drunkenness in movies from all periods is verbal slurring and lispng -- conveyed through the subtitles in the silent period (e.g., Our Dancing Daughters, 1928). But in the sound era, the use of this signal raises a technical problem: the drunk person becomes hard to comprehend, and a substantial stretch of slurred speech is very wearing for listeners. With its concern for veracity, Smash-Up (1947) seemed to me to have created difficulties for itself in this line. The solution in most films is to suggest slurring or drunken syntax in a phrase or two, but to have drunken characters otherwise speak normally.

One of the most durable elements in the presentation of drunkenness in a serious vein is the depiction of delirium tremens (DTs). A DTs scene was almost obligatory in 19th Century temperance melodramas, offering the actor in the drunkard's part the opportunity for a tour de force. Jack Lemmon, who as a young actor had played in a revival of The Drunkard, the quintessential 19th Century temperance melodrama (Widener, 1975), took the opportunity in Days of Wine and Roses (1963), his first dramatic screen role, to bring this tradition into the modern era. From the first days of the movies, however, filmmakers had been exploring other means available to the medium to depict an attack of DTs. In the first filmed Ten Nights in a Barroom (1913), a shot of writhing snakes is inserted into the depiction of the DTs episode. By the early 1930s, it appears, either snakes or fits seemed old-fashioned and crude. The 1930 remake of Ten Nights in a Barroom is concerned to present an old-fashioned story in a more modern style: the daughter is merely stunned rather than killed by a flying beer mug when she visits the bar, and Joe Morgan's drunkard's progress is presented without creepy-crawlies. In The Struggle (1931), Griffiths solves both the problem of what to do about the daughter and the problem of how to present DTs in a naturalistic fashion by having the drunkard believe that he is choking his daughter to death in a drunken frenzy, while keeping us apprised that this is only a hallucination on the drunkard's part.

In the light of these movies, the handling of DTs in the two most famous "alcoholism films" of the postwar era can be seen as a throwback to earlier traditions. Self-consciously invoking horror-movie traditions, The Lost Weekend (1945) includes a sequence of a fluttering bat devouring a mouse through a hole in the wall, while Lemmon in Days of Wine and Roses (1963) might be said to have put into literal action the old canard about 19th Century actors chewing the scenery. Other movies of the period adopted less baroque expedients. In Smash-Up (1947), the film most closely supervised by alcoholism movement leaders (Johnson, 1973), the nearest we get

to the topic is a sequence of the protagonist writhing in bed, in the grip of nightmares.

The Movies and the Weting of America:

As we have traced the patterns above, there is both continuity and change in the portrayal of drinking in American films. At the level of detailed elements of the action which we have been considering, movies with quite different overall "alcohol politics" may yet make similar linkages in their presentation of alcohol. Further study -- and particularly study in a framework of comparison with other national traditions of filmmaking -- may reveal substantial commonalities in the cultural codes portrayed in American films concerning behavior associated with drunkenness, even though there are clearly great differences -- between genres, as well as between historical periods -- in the degrees of power and of consequentiality attributed to drinking.

But our awareness of these potential commonalities should be matched by an awareness of the enormous differences in the politics of alcohol in the U.S. in the course of the 20th century, and of the relation of the movies to those changes. The most obvious political expressions of the national struggles over alcohol were the adoption of national Prohibition (1919) and its subsequent Repeal (1933). But behind these political changes lay a set of broader cultural changes. At the time, among the most obvious changes were the alterations in the attitudes and behavior of "respectable people" in the middle classes. We can set the watershed in drinking behaviors among middle-class college students at about 1928. Whereas the previous generation of college students had been relatively "dry" in their attitudes and supportive of Prohibition, a temperance worker, writing in the late 1930s, could assemble impressive evidence of a "college drinking epidemic" at the end of the 1920s, concluding that

the present trend is a reversal of the trend of 100 years. It is toward a wider diffusion of drinking practices and greater regularity of use among larger numbers. For a comparable situation one must turn back, not twenty, nor thirty years, but to the conditions that prevailed more than a century ago. (Warner, 1970, pp. 70, 95)

But the change to a much "wetter" cultural outlook on alcohol was not confined to the general middle class. With some variations in timing, we can observe the switchover occurring in many segments of American society. In literary and bohemian subcultures, we can set the watershed as occurring a half-generation before the general middle-class change; famous American literary figures with a reputation for heavy drinking are particularly concentrated in the cohort which came of age after 1910 (Room, 1982). Working back from cirrhosis mortality data for different birth cohorts, it seems that among urban Black Americans, primarily of lower socioeconomic status, the shift to a much "wetter" culture begins with the cohort which came of age during the 1920s (Herd, 1983b).

The presentation of drinking in films interrelates with this cultural transformation in a number of ways. In the years before Prohibition, the movies were seen as major supports for the temperance cause, both by the "wets" and -- more equivocally -- by the "drys". For one thing, they were the most attractive substitute yet devised for the saloon. A Chicago police official estimated that they had cut in half the business of saloons in a Northside district; "laboring men with their entire families trooped off to the pictures in the evening. The next morning the man finds his family happy, his own head clear, 35¢ to 50¢ more in his pocket, . . . and his conscience in good working order" (Cherrington, 1925-30, p. 1828). But in addition, the content of the early

movies was seen as a force for temperance. A liquor industry journal complained, "who has ever seen liquor portrayed in any but the most unfavorable light by the movies? The films accept every chance to link liquor with the drug habits. What makes the rural lover go wrong? Liquor, always liquor. And hooked up with liquor must be evil women. The movies have made a goat of liquor" (Sinclair, 1964, p. 320). Wisconsin brewers saw portrayals of their beverage in the same light: "the producers have shown a tendency to associate every dive scene, every human derelict, wayward son, or ruined home, with a beer sign or a mug of beer; and nowhere in the productions have the producers ever associated beer with a decent atmosphere". In 1915, the mayor of Seattle claimed that "the films were directly responsible for influencing the people of the State of Washington to vote that State dry" (Cherrington, 1928, p. 1828).

While the movies were already well established by the onset of Prohibition -- there were 21,000 movie houses in 1916 -- they considerably increased their presence in American life in the 1920s, with attendance doubling in the last 5 years of the decade. In public discourse, at least as much influence was attributed to the movies then as is attributed to TV today, and thus, like TV today, films were a major symbolic arena for battles over the hegemony of different moral codes. Reflecting this, a series of 12 studies of the "influence of motion pictures on children and youth" were undertaken in 1928, although the reports did not appear until well into the next decade (e.g., Dale, 1935). A 1932 report commissioned by President Hoover noted that

for the vast audience the pictures and 'filmland' have tremendous vitality. Pictures and actors are regarded with a seriousness that is likely to escape the casual observer who employs formal criteria of judgment. Editors of popular motion picture magazines are deluged with letters from motion picture patrons, unburdening themselves of an infinite variety of feelings and attitudes, deeply personal, which focus around the lives and activities of those inhabiting the screen world. One editor receives over 80,000 such letters a year. These are filled with self-revelations which indicate, sometimes deliberately, more often unconsciously, the influence of the screen upon manners, dress, codes and matters of romance. (Willey and Rice, 1934, p. 209)

By the end of the 1920s, the movies were seen in a radically different light from 15 years earlier, as a major carrier of "wet" values in the society. Under pressure from temperance interests, in 1926 Will Hays had announced an industry policy forbidding shots of "drinking scenes, manufacture or sale of liquor or undue effects of liquor which are not a necessary part of the story or an essential element in the building up of the plot." The Atlanta Constitution, joining a general chorus of editorial approval of the policy, noted "there is no mistaking the fact that producers have recently accepted a very prevailing opinion that Prohibition enforcement is a farce and have accordingly held Prohibition up to common ridicule." But The New York World struck a dissenting note: "there are a good many contenders for the prize of Prohibition hypocrisy, but Mr. Hays, declaring that so far as the movies go the United States is 100 percent dry, takes the lead" (Anonymous, 1926).

The record of the ensuing years belies the effectiveness of Hays' ukase. By the end of the decade, content analyses by worried study committees showed that the movies were very "wet" both in their content and in their sympathies -- far wetter, in fact, than other mass entertainment media. A study of 115 films released in 1929-1931 found that 43% of them showed intoxication, 66% showed drinking, and less than 10% had no reference to or display of liquor. The references

were predominantly favorable: 3/4 of the films showing intoxication treated it as humorous; and while 43% of the "heroes" and 23% of the "heroines" were shown drinking, only 13% of the "villains" and 8% of the "villainesses" were seen to drink (Dale, 1935, pp. 168-9). Another study of 33 movies released in 1932 found that drinking was shown over 3 times as often with approval or tolerance as with disapproval -- and that in 40% of the approving instances this included approval of women drinking. This "wet" bias contrasted with attitudes in contemporary magazine short stories, in which approval and disapproval for drinking were much more evenly balanced (Hart, 1934, p. 427). "Drys" also had reason to complain about the screen presentation of current news: a study of two newsreel services between mid-1931 and mid-1932 found "wet" viewpoint stories outnumbering "dry" by at least 4:1. An MGM director could justly claim in 1933, shortly after Repeal, that "I believe it was the motion picture, showing that in spite of prohibition liquor was an immense factor in American life, that had a great deal to do with changing sentiment on the question" (Dale, 1935, p. 170).

The extraordinary wetness of the movies of the early 1930s seems to have reflected the confluence of a number of factors. To some extent, the patterns reflected the particular political situation of the early 1930s, and to some extent they also represented the culmination of specific cultural changes around alcohol; but representations of drinking in films of this period were also tied to broader patterns of cultural change in moral codes. The 1920s had witnessed a generational conflict over life style and gender roles, and in this conflict drinking served as one of a number of "symbols of liberation" -- or signs of degradation, in terms of the older moral code -- for 1920s youth (Fass, 1977). In a style pioneered in fiction by F. Scott Fitzgerald in This Side of Paradise (1920) -- and in the movies of the early 1920s by Cecil DeMille -- the movies of the late 1920s titillated their audiences with the house parties, dances and midnight rides of wealthy youth, even though formally they remained within the older moral code where in the end vice is punished and virtue rewarded. In After Midnight (1927), for instance, we are treated to a fable of the grasshopper and the ant: two sisters rooming together in New York, one working as a virtuous and thrifty cigaret girl in a nightclub, the other as a flighty, selfish and profligate chorus girl. In the end, the chorus girl dies in a car crash, while the cigaret girl gets her man, along with a dowry of a \$1000 bond. But this thoroughly moral plot skeleton is fleshed out with subversive irony. The chorus girl may not be an attractive person, but the life she leads -- in a never-never land of exclusive upper-class clubs, mansions and parties, with a \$1000 bond as a party favor -- is seductive not only to the viewer but also, in the end, to her plain-living sister. The latter accompanies the chorus girl and her friends to a party, and, as noted above, shortly after her first drink becomes the life of the party. The chorus girl's death comes when, smitten with an attack of conscience, she tries to drive her sister home. Her death leaves the reunited couple with the \$1000 party favor for their start on married life.

Throughout the 1920s, the formal structure of film plots remains within the bounds of the older moral code. But, as in After Midnight, the formal proprieties are increasingly subverted by the portrayal of attractive and affluent lifestyles lying outside the older code, and by increasing irony about and even inversion of the code's values. While The Mad Whirl (1924) is coyly titillating in its display of affluent houseparties and beach parties, and inverts expectations by showing the parents as greater "fiends for excitement -- cars -- jazz -- new mates for old" than their son, the moral structure remains straightforward: the son's true love will only marry him when he

renounces his partying and drinking. But by the time of Our Dancing Daughters (1928), the moral structure, while still visible, has been partly inverted. The girl who is obedient to her elders, fixated on making a good marriage, and concerned not only about the fact but about the appearance of virginity, is a conniving liar who indeed gets the boy but then, intoxicated and abusive, falls justly to her death. The girl who drinks openly in front of her parents, dances gaily on table-tops, and is concerned more to be true to herself than about the appearance of morality, is the virtuous heroine who inherits the boy.

In many films of the early 1930s, the traditional moral frame has totally evaporated; the ethic which replaces it might be summed up as "be true to yourself". The characters of Night after Night (1932) or of Hold Your Man (1933) come from a different world -- cynical, individualistic, and larcenous. It is a world that proved too shocking to continue; a modicum of propriety was restored by the Catholic Legion of Decency code in 1935. But, whereas Hays' earlier efforts, during Prohibition, to enforce self-censorship had operated in an implicitly Protestant environment, the new moral order of the "Breen code" conformed to the standards of Irish-American Catholics -- and furthermore was adopted after Repeal. Thus, while both the Hays office and the Breen code were much concerned about sex, the later code had no such concern about drinking.

In part, then, the constant drinking of the movies of the 1930s represented a residue of the role of drinking in the preceding few years -- in the society as well as in the films (Fass, 1977) -- as one of the symbols of revolt from the traditional moral order. Given the association of drinking with sexuality for women, drinking by women was an especially potent symbol of this revolt, and it is women's drinking much more than men's on which the camera and the action tends to focus. In Night after Night, the gangster protagonist asks for a drink of water from his protagonist, and complains that he's "sick of the smell of booze -- sick of being the friend of a lot of drunks". Whereas in early 20th-Century America, drinking is a part of the world of men, the triad of woman-drink-sex established in movies like Our Modern Maidens and Night after Night sets up a continuing contrast between the hard, clean, action-packed world of men and the softer "home front" of women and drinking. Thus in High Sierra (1941), Bogart, as a hold-up man hiding out in the mountains, does not drink at all, and the film's main drinking scene is an occasion for his disgust. He comes to see a young woman in whom he was romantically interested walk, after having paid for an operation on her clubfoot. He finds her dancing to a phonograph with her new beau and another couple. There has been quite a bit of drinking, and the woman of the other couple in particular is behaving suggestively. The scene is set up so we feel sympathetic to Bogart's disgust: the young woman has fallen from grace and purity by her drinking, her choice of companions, and her demeanor.

To modern eyes, however, the drinking shown in the movies of the late 1920s and early 1930s is not only a symbol of contrast between two moral orders. In films like The Last Flight (1931) and The Thin Man (1934) one also gets the feeling that the drinking is being shown for its own sake: that part of the motivation for putting so much drinking in the movies is the idea that people will pay good money just to watch people on the screen drink. The Last Flight (1931), a low budget semi-parody of Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, starts with four American flyers, wounded in the First World War, being discharged from military hospital in France. In almost the opening lines, one flyer says to another, "The old guerre is fini. What are you going to do now, Shep?" "Get tight!" "And then what?" "Stay tight." Heading to Paris, they join forces with a

young American woman, whom they meet holding a champagne glass in a high-class bistro. Much of the dialogue, as well as the action, concerns drinks and drinking. The dialogue includes such lines as the following. "Have a drink. It will cure the shakes." "You're coming all apart -- here, take a drink of this -- you can laugh and play." "Such a sad story -- let's have a drink." "You sure are in an uproar: what you need is a drink." "I'll be all right when I've had a couple of drinks." "I wonder if a feller can get a drink on this train". Going into a bullfight ring in Portugal: "I wonder if there's a bar inside or anything." The drinking is definitely not associated with sexuality; in fact the opposite. The four men's sole passion is for drinking, and woman has nothing to fear or hope from any of them. On the other hand, a sinister American foreign correspondent, hanging around with the group, has clear sexual designs on the woman: he tries to take her off alone, paws her objectionably at a dance-hall, tries to rape her on the train. Much of the time, he does not drink along with the others, and in fact berates them on their drinking: "Drunk again. Why don't you fellows go home and go to work?" The others punish him for pawing the woman by tricking him into balancing two full martini glasses on the back of his hands: "That'll keep him hands busy for a moment."

I believe that what we are seeing in a movie like The Last Flight might be described as a pornography of drinking. In the 1960s, as the censorship on sexual explicitness in American films broke down, a dynamic of increasing titillation became established. With the film industry (as in the early 1930s) in financial difficulties, filmmakers found that people would pay good money to see another inch of skin exposed, another barrier in suggestive or explicit sexual behavior crossed. Once this idea had become established, the process of increasing titillation acquired a dynamic of its own, pushing filmmakers into the depiction of more and more extreme behaviors until, as with films of bestiality and "snuff films", it became clear that the tastes of any conceivable mass audience had been left far behind. The dynamic thus burned itself out, but it left behind, as something now taken for granted, a far higher level of sexual explicitness than had been true at the start of the 1960s.

With drinking in the 1920s and 1930s, an analogous process starts out with films like The Mad Whirl (1924) and The Goose Woman (1925). Both these films are clearly made under an injunction to avoid showing drinking, as an illegal behavior, within the sight of the viewer. But both pictures sail as close as possible to this mark. The protagonist of The Goose Woman turns away from the camera to down her drink: the only time we see her drinking with face to the camera, it is a bottle of hair tonic (60% alcohol but presumably legal to drink during Prohibition). The Mad Whirl starts with the intertitle, "At the Harrington home, 11 a.m. is the Bromo Seltzer hour". For all the members of the family, the previous night's debauchery leaves them with frequent morning hangovers, and the parade of servants with hangover remedies is a recurrent motif in the film. The intertitles throughout are decorated with pictures of liquor bottles and glasses in shifting configurations. Recurrent shots of parties at the Harrington's house focus on empty bottles and glasses. We are shown "starting time" at one of these parties; a line of people in the foreground ostentatiously turn their backs to the camera and gulp down their drinks in a toast.

By the time of Our Dancing Daughters (1928) and After Midnight (1927), drinking is openly and frequently shown, often in glamorous or luxurious settings. An argument could be made that all the drinking is necessary to the plot or to characterization, although the definition of "necessary" would have to be spread broadly. Still, in 1931, Blonde Crazy includes a good deal

of business around the peddling of bootleg alcohol, and dialogue making explicit connections between drinking and sexual activity, but drinking is only portrayed on the screen a couple of times. In the same year, The Last Flight provides us with a memorable example of a film devoted essentially to depicting drinking: but presumably this film would actually fit the 1926 Hays guidelines, since all the drinking is done in countries where it would be legal. But films such as Night after Night (1932) or Hold Your Man (1933), awash with drinking, have no such legalistic cover.

After about 1934, the self-consciousness and ubiquity of the drinking seem to decline. In part, of course, this would have been due to the repeal of Prohibition: law-abiding audiences need no longer confine themselves to watching others' drinking. But I suspect that audiences may also have just become tired of the spectacle. In the depths of the Depression, and in the wake of Repeal, drinking lost some of its symbolic power. But on screen, as in American life, a heightened level of drinking, and a normalization of drinking by middle-class people, remained behind as a residue of the period when drinking was a self-conscious symbol of personal liberty and autonomy. As Paula Fass remarks in tracing a parallel development, "what the college youth of the thirties inherited were the innovations of their predecessors without much of their self-consciousness" (1977, p. 270). An analogous process has been described in French history, where in reaction to the suppression of working-class cafe culture in the 1870s a permanently higher level of drinking became established (Barrows, 1982).

A further factor which probably played a part in the crescendo of attention to drinking in American movies was the political debate over modification or nullification of Prohibition. Looking back from half a century later, it is hard to realize just how sudden was the political avalanche that suddenly made outright repeal seem possible. The 18th Amendment had locked Prohibition into the U.S. Constitution in 1919. The strong popular support for Prohibition in the early 1920s had considerably waned by the late 1920s, and the advent of the Depression in particular turned both big business and organized labor against it. Even before the Depression, the lawlessness associated with Prohibition had prompted a promise from Hoover, the "dry" candidate of 1928, that as President he would appoint a commission to examine its workings. But the Constitution is hard to change; as late as 1930, the author of the Amendment had reason to boast that "there is as much chance of repealing the 18th Amendment as there is for a humming-bird to fly to the planet Mars with the Washington Monument tied to its tail". Faced with this impasse, Hoover's Commission issued a final report in 1931 that was badly split and internally inconsistent. In this, the commissioners were not alone: the SF Chronicle thought the confusion and conflicts of the commissioners were "a perfect picture of the public mind".

In the election year of 1932, the tide of public opinion turned decisively against the "drys", and some sort of modification of Prohibition suddenly seemed possible, and very soon inevitable -- although it remained unclear until 1933 how complete the repeal would be. Though both Presidential candidates had tried to keep their party platforms relatively "dry", as adopted the Democratic platform was uncompromisingly "wet" and even the Republic platform was "damp". Will Rogers commented that "both sides are wet and the poor old dry hasn't got a soul to vote for". Roosevelt pronounced after his nomination in June that "from this date on, the Eighteenth Amendment is doomed"; in hindsight, Hoover concluded in his memoirs that during the year "the country suddenly jelled against" Prohibition. Writing at about this time in a scholarly journal, a

"dry" organizer reflected the mood of the moment in his complaint that Prohibition had not been adopted "by the route of stampede in the year of a national political campaign".

But the coming of Repeal was indeed precipitous. At the November elections, not only was Roosevelt elected, but referenda in eleven states nullified state enforcement of Prohibition, and a tide of "wet" candidates was swept into Congress. After the election, even the lame-duck "dry" Congress came close to the necessary 2/3 vote for Repeal. In 1933, Repeal was submitted to the states and ratified in record time, and, rather than wait for ratification, at Roosevelt's behest, Congress in the meantime legalized 3.2% beer. At a few minutes after midnight on April 7, 1933, the first cases of legal beer were ceremoniously delivered to the White House.

For most movies of the time, this dramatic political history remains unseen. But there is one film of the time in which we can see the political wind concerning alcohol changing. This is The Wet Parade, the only movie ever made from an Upton Sinclair novel (the novel was published in 1931). The Wet Parade documents a very specific historical moment, the months before the election of Roosevelt decisively telegraphed that Prohibition would be repealed. The uncertain mood of this untidy epic is conveyed by its closing lines; gazing fondly at his newborn son, the hero remarks, "he's been born into an awful mess, but before they pull him into it, and thousands like him, I guess they'll have it figured out".

The Wet Parade is in part a collocation of vintage temperance melodramas. A Southern paterfamilias (Lewis Stone) in pre-Prohibition days ends his drinking career committing suicide in a pig pen. After Prohibition comes, a hotel-keeper in the urban North (Walter Huston) kills his wife in a drunken rage when she tries to take away his bootleg bottle. Both the daughter and son of the Southern family eventually move North, the son (Neil Hamilton) to pursue his talent as a writer. Anticipating a motif of The Lost Weekend, the son's creativity and sensitivity make him especially susceptible to the lures of drinking; before long, he is permanently blinded by tainted moonshine. In reaction to their parents, both the Southern daughter (Dorothy Jordan) and the hotelkeeper's son (Robert Young) become militant abstainers; they meet, fall in love, marry, and by the end of the film have produced the newborn son. Sobriety is as well rewarded as intemperance is punished.

Grafted onto this old-fashioned plot is a quasi-documentary presentation of the politics of alcohol and the mechanics of a legally dry society "from the wet age to this year of grace", as the NY Times reviewer put it. Several scenes portray the rhetoric and style -- particularly concerning the liquor question -- of both sides of the Wilson-Hughes Presidential contest of 1916. The transition from wartime temporary restrictions to Constitutional Prohibition is shown, with scenes of frantic drinkers laying in their last legal supplies and of farewell parties and mock burials for John Barleycorn. The Times reviewer was particularly impressed by a sequence following through the whole process of manufacture and "aging" of "imported" liquor somewhere in New York City: in his view, "certainly this is enough to make many fight shy of bootlegged whisky". Even the structure of the illicit market is sketched in, with depictions of the respectable capitalists who control its finances.

In yet another facet, The Wet Parade can be seen as an early gangster movie. The teetotaling son, putting his body where his mouth is, takes a job as a Prohibition agent. Jimmy Durante, as a bluff, wisecracking veteran of the service, is detailed to show him the ropes and be his partner, and the unlikely pair proceed to make considerable waves in the underworld by

refusing to go along with the prevailing corruption. In the end, Jimmy Durante saves Robert Young from being dragged to his death behind a gang's car, is shot for his pains, and dies a protracted and sentimental death in Robert Young's arms.

Flavoring this whole eclectic stew is a profoundly ambivalent viewpoint on alcohol as a political issue. Partly this reflects the splintering of the temperance forces in 1932: many who had favored temperance -- including D.W. Griffith and J.D. Rockefeller -- were now turning publicly against Prohibition. Many comments in The Wet Parade -- particularly by the two Prohibition agents and their boss -- reflect the pragmatic cast of much of this opposition. Thus the Durante character comments on youthful drinkers as "a lot of peach-fuzz chins getting drunk at high noon. You never saw that before Prohibition". His boss, though not corrupt, is particularly outspoken about his lack of sympathy for the law he is charged with enforcing. But the ambivalence of view goes beyond distinguishing between Prohibition and true temperance. The young teetotaling couple are portrayed as out of step with the society; to be an abstainer, to believe in Prohibition, and still more to act out that belief, is not only square but definitely odd. The blinded brother, an object not only of pity but of sympathy after his misfortune, exclaims at one point, "Can't you two stop foisting your family nightmares on the rest of the world?" In the last moments of the movie, after the doting parents have exclaimed how pink their son's hands are, the brother adds, "Yeah, and I bet he has a lil blue nose".

For the last 40 years, the governing imagery in public discussions of drinking as a social issue has been the disease concept of alcoholism. In this view, alcohol-related problems in the society have little or nothing to do with general cultural patterns of drinking or social or legal controls on drinking; instead they are attributable to a genetic or developmental defect which means that some people cannot handle their liquor. Along with this view went a reprivatization of alcohol problems; what had been a matter of public discourse and action became again, as it had been over 100 years before, a matter of private anguish, to be handled on an individual basis within the family, by associates, or in a treatment clinic. What is most striking about The Wet Parade to the modern viewer, with a consciousness formed by the alcoholism era, is the degree to which in the movie alcohol is a political matter, a public rather than private problem. The Wet Parade catches for us the last moment in U.S. history when alcohol was a transcendent political matter, the stuff of Presidential commissions and party platforms. Its ambivalence is a poignant reflection of its historical location, at a point of inflection between two frames of cultural consciousness.

Concluding Remarks:

This paper is a preliminary record of some aspects of work in progress. It is intended to open up for discussion some of the lines of analysis our group has been pursuing as we struggle to make sense of a vast and variegated record. There are, of course, a number of different perspectives from which we can look at the historical record of a medium such as films. The presentation of alcohol can be studied in the framework of developments in film techniques and conventions; certainly such developments need to be kept in mind in pursuing other perspectives. Individual films can be studied as works of art, and the role of alcohol in them considered in terms of the aesthetics and craft of artistic creation. Much can be learned from studying the interplay between the social organization of the film industry and the lifestyles and personal histories of filmmakers, on the one hand, and the films that they made, on the other. In particular, in the

1930s and 1940s, many of an especially "wet" generation of American writers went to work in Hollywood; their attitudes and experiences concerning drinking may well have colored the pictures of the 1930s, and certainly -- as their drinking histories began to catch up with them -- colored the spate of "alcoholism" movies of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Our emphasis here, however, has been on studying the reflection of the social history of alcohol and drinking in American films, and charting the place of film portrayals of drinking in American social history. I have found myself devoting Friday nights and various other odd times to watching forgotten or famous movies -- watching them usually with wonderment and excitement -- because of two major research agendas set by previous work in which I have been involved. One agenda is to understand the normative structure around drinking, and its cultural variance. The other is to understand how change happens -- how ideas, behaviors and material circumstances interact in history; in particular, how big changes in drinking attitudes and behaviors occur. The record of American movies opens for us a rich vein of material for assaying both these questions.

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