

The movies and the wetting of America: the media as amplifiers of cultural change

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Summary

By around 1930, the movies were a very "wet" medium. The attractive picture they presented of drinking as part of a cosmopolitan, affluent lifestyle reflected and popularized a generational revolt against "Victorian morality". In a kind of "pornography of drinking", filmmakers reacted to code restrictions on showing drinking with increasingly bold teases, until some movies around 1930 appear to have been made with the idea that the audience will pay to watch people, and particularly women, drinking. After Repeal (1933), the movies continue to show much drinking, but without the self-conscious symbolization of the preceding years. The movies amplified as they carried the new understandings of drinking.

For the first half of the twentieth century, as Sklar notes, the "movies were the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States" (1975, p. 1). In the first decades of the century, the United States was also the scene of an epic struggle over policy towards a psychoactive drug, alcohol, a struggle epitomized by the adoption of national Prohibition (1919) and its subsequent Repeal (1933). To observers at the time, films played an important part in this struggle. Commenting on the victory of Repeal, an MGM director could reasonably claim 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).

Drawing on social studies and commentary by contemporaries, as well as on the material of films of the period themselves, this paper seeks to document and explicate the place of the movies in the "wetting" of American culture in the crucial decade from about 1924 to 1934. It is intended as a case study in processes of cultural change, and in particular, in the processes by which a psychoactive drug's cultural position shifts from the periphery to the center -- from being confined to special, often marginalized, groups or functions to becoming entrenched in the everyday life of ordinary people.

SHIFTS IN THE SOCIAL LOCATION OF DRINKING

In the late 1920s, alcohol use became a symbolic arena for a more general conflict within middle-class America, a conflict to a large extent between an older generation committed to the values of "Victorian morality", and a younger generation experimenting with new lifestyles and gender roles (Fass, 1977; Room, 1984). Prohibition, adopted originally with strong popular

support, eventually rendered drinking a perfect symbol of generational revolt, "the symbol of a sacred cause", as Liebling recollected (Liebling, 1981, p. 667). The year 1928, in a temperance observer's view, marked the beginning of a "college drinking epidemic" marked by "a wider diffusion of drink practices and greater regularity of use among larger numbers" (Warner, 1970, pp. 70,79). At the same time, partly by raising the effective price of alcohol and forcing it into its most concentrated form, Prohibition wiped out beer consumption and effectively limited working-class drinking. Warburton (1932) concluded that, while Prohibition had reduced consumption overall by two-thirds at its most effective, and even around 1930 by one-third, middle-class drinking levels in the aggregate had been little affected. In image and to a large extent in reality, the modal social location of heavy drinking shifted from middle-aged workers to affluent college students. As a college student put it in 1929, "the drunkard is still with us. The type has passed from the tired working-man to the jaded fraternity-man" (Stouffer, 1980, p. 257).

While the college generation coming of age in the late 1920s and 1930s played a crucial role in its eventual entrenchment, the change to a much "wetter" cultural outlook on alcohol filtered into 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, 1984). 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 also begins with the cohort which came of age during the 1920s (Herd, 1985). In the "dryer" regions of the U.S. -- the South and Prairie states -- entrenchment of drinking in the middle class is a much more recent phenomenon (Room, 1983).

THE MOVIES AND TEMPERANCE

In the years before Prohibition, the movies had been seen as major supports for the temperance cause, both by the "wets" and -- more equivocally -- by the "drys". In the first place, 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). A British committee on the "drink problem" gathered repeated testimony that the "tendencies towards sobriety" they found among British workingmen in the postwar period reflected such new "counter-attractions" as the cinema: "many men prefer to go to picture-houses rather than sit in public-houses" (Social and Economic Aspects . . ., 1931, pp. 49, 52, 53, 54, 58.)

In the second place, the content of the early movies was seen as a force for temperance. While middle-class moralists spent considerable energy in the early years of the century on censoring the new medium (Sklar, 1975), portrayals of drinking were not their prime focus. Temperance melodramas, indeed, were an important movie genre until the early 1920s (Silverman, 1979). The output included 1909 shorts by D.W. Griffith, full-length versions in 1913 and 1921 of the quintessential temperance melodrama, Ten Nights in a Barroom (Herd and Room, 1982), and such dry propaganda films as Prohibition and Distilled Spirits (both 1915) and The Curse of Drink (1922) (Starks, 1982, p. 31). 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, 1925-30, p. 1828).

In the later 1920s, temperance melodramas became fewer, less successful, and more apologetic or even-handed in their tone. While new versions of Ten Nights in a Barroom appeared in 1926 and 1930, the 1930 version sets its tale in the past, and adds a self-conscious frame in which the town doctor is looking back to the old days and telling his cronies, who are turning against Prohibition, about the evils of the old-time saloon. The film was received with derision by the New York Times reviewer, who remarked about its "pre-war hokum" that "those who come to laugh will probably stay to laugh". Griffiths' last film, The Struggle (1931), dressed up a temperance melodrama with a prologue blaming the main character's inebriety on Prohibition, and contrasting its cautionary tale with opening shots of halcyon drinking in pre-war beer-gardens. Despite the sugar-coating, the film proved unpalatable to movie audiences and was withdrawn within one week.

As the political climate turned decisively against Prohibition in 1932, temperance melodramas disappeared from view -- to reappear, in some respects, in the alcoholism films of a later era (Herd and Room, 1982; Room, 1985). The last such melodrama made before Repeal, The Wet Parade (1932), was based on an Upton Sinclair novel published in 1931. An untidy epic, the film includes three interwoven temperance melodramas, along with a quasi-documentary presentation of the politics of alcohol, and an essay in the gangster genre (Clarens, 1980). Its uncertain mood 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 film has 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 J.D. Rockefeller -- were now turning publicly against Prohibition (Levine, 1985). Some of the comments in The Wet Parade reflect the pragmatic cast of much of this opposition. A prohibition enforcement agent 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 and heroic 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 moonshine-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 li'l blue nose".

THE MOVIES AROUND 1930: THE "WETTEST" MEDIUM

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 (Sklar, 1975). 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)

Whereas in earlier years the movies had been seen as a force for the "drys", by the end of the 1920s they were seen in a radically different light, as a major carrier of "wet" values in the society. Under pressure from temperance interests, in 1926 the president of the film industry's office of self-regulation, 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: three-quarters 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.

BREAKING THROUGH THE MORAL FRAME

As Sklar (1975) details, the 1910s saw a substantial revolution in the movie production industry. Breaking the control of the industry by an Eastern-based middle-class oligopoly, the new powers in the industry, based in Hollywood, were oriented not to uplifting the mores of the poor but to mass entertainment. Tempered by experiences in New York and elsewhere with censorship boards, movie makers had worked out an accommodative formula, exemplified in Cecil B. DeMille's early films, of "titillating audiences while at the same time reinforcing their conventional standards -- of letting them eat their cake and have it too" (Sklar, 1975, p. 95). This formula, worked out and crystallized concerning sexual behavior, formed the initial frame for presentations of drinking when it, too, was rendered an illicit behavior by the advent of Prohibition.

In a style pioneered in fiction by F. Scott Fitzgerald in This Side of Paradise (1920), many of the successful movies of the late 1920s titillated their audiences with the house parties, dances and midnight drives 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; some propriety was restored by the "Breen code" enforced, under pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency, 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 spoke to the concerns roughly speaking of Irish-American Catholics -- and furthermore was adopted after Repeal. Thus, while both the earlier Hays codes and the Breen code were much concerned about sexual behavior and suggestiveness, the later code had little such concern about drinking.

THE SYMBOLISM OF DRINKING

In the movies of the late 1920s and early 1930s, drinking thus carried many symbolic meanings. Certainly drinking, and particularly inebriety, often carried its older temperance-movement implications of moral dissolution, ill-health and despair (Herd, 1986). But alongside these were set a range of positive associations. Glasses of champagne set the tone for many films of gay luxuriance, of life as a party. In the hands of youthful characters, as for the college students of the time, an alcoholic beverage was also part of a complex of "symbols of liberation" from Victorian respectability -- a complex including also jazz, close dancing, and women's cigarette smoking (Fass, 1977).

A drink in the hands of a young woman was an especially potent symbol of this revolt, since it carried with it an implication of sexual availability. "Lunch is poured", someone announces to the prep-school girls on the train at the beginning of Our Modern Maidens (1929), after they have made clear their preoccupation with "love, beautiful love" and "MEN!", and they dash through the carriages to an impromptu mixed-sex party with the drinks in paper cups. Later, at a house-party, sips of champagne on a gondola serve to motivate a woman's successful seduction of her best friend's fiancé. This longstanding cultural linking for women of drinking with sexuality, which can be seen also in movies of the 1950s and 1960s (Herd, 1986; Room, 1985), meant that the camera and the action often focused on women's drinking much more than men's. Counterposed to this softer world of romance and drinking, the hard, clean, action-packed world of men, in movies like Our Modern Maidens (1929) or Night after Night (1932), is often devoid of drinking. In Night after Night, the gangster nightclub owner asks for a drink of water from his bartender, and complains that he's "sick of the smell of booze -- sick of being the friend of a lot of drunks". The pattern recurs in later U.S. films. 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 he has 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. This association of drinking with softness and sexuality, in contrast to the hard world of men alone, is very different from the pattern noted in Finnish films, where women and drinking are clear antagonists (Falk and Sulkunen, 1983).

THE DYNAMICS OF AMPLIFICATION

Besides the symbolic values it carries, the drinking shown in the movies of the late 1920s and early 1930s appears to modern eyes to be being shown for its own sake. Part of the motivation for putting so much drinking in the movies, it seems, was 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 -- such lines as: "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"; and "I wonder if a feller can get a drink on this train". Entering a bullfight stadium in Portugal provokes the comment: "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 a 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 his hands busy for a moment."

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 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. As late as 1931, in Blonde Crazy, while we find a

good deal of business around the peddling of bootleg alcohol, and dialogue making explicit connections between drinking and sexual activity, nevertheless 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. A year or two later, 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 it may also be that audiences had 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 from symbolic statements to matter-of-course behaviors, "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).

CONCLUSION

To what extent the media reflect behavior in a society and to what extent they shape it has long been a vexed issue in media studies (Dorn and South, 1983). In the case of the movies and the "wetting" of American culture, there is no question that the wetness of Hollywood movies of the late 1920s was a refraction of ongoing cultural changes. The drinking portrayed in the films existed only in a fantasy land, but it was a fantasy land which had some objective referent. However, at the time the films appeared, the changes were evident only in small segments of the society -- notably in Bohemian literary and artistic circles (present, of course, in Hollywood itself), and among middle- and upper-class youth, particularly on the Coasts.

By their nature, communications media that are not heavily and vigilantly censored will serve as the messenger for the spread of any fad or fashion. Drinking and heavy drinking became entrenched among middle-class people after the mid-1920s in the manner by which fashions are adopted, with the patterns first set by "fashion leaders", in much the same way that tobacco or coffee spread in Europe after their introduction (Austin, 1978), or for that matter that cocaine use spread in the U.S. since 1975. In this process, the "news" which is received by the audience may carry a different moral emphasis from the message's overt moral framework -- as Winick (1963) found in a study of the audience effects of a film concerning drug addiction, The Man with the Golden Arm (1955).

Certainly the films we have been considering found receptive audiences; some from the period, such as The Thin Man (1934), have continued their popularity to the present day. But observation of the films themselves, along with the testimony of contemporaries, suggests the medium was not merely a passive conduit for new cultural messages. In the process of diffusion, the movies we have been considering greatly amplified the message they carried. In part, this amplification resulted from a process of pushing at the limits with which censors attempted to

constrain the message. In part, the amplification reflected a historic moment in which alcohol and drinking bore an especially heavy load of symbolic messages.

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