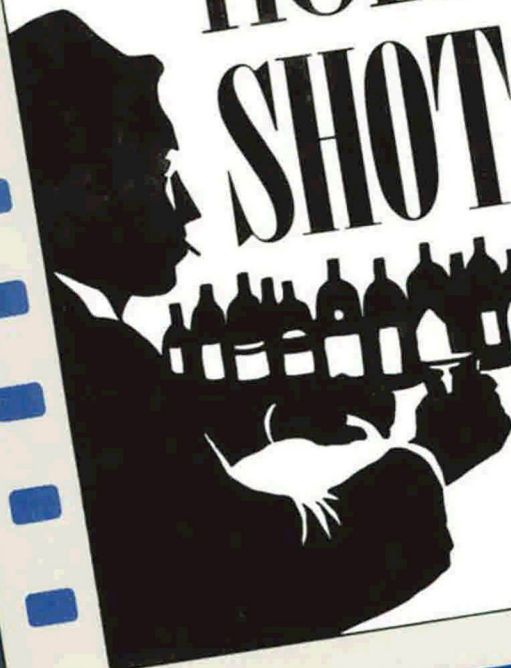


HOLLYWOOD SHOT *by* SHOT



*Alcoholism in
American Cinema*

NORMAN K. DENZIN

**HOLLYWOOD
SHOT BY SHOT**



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Alcoholism in American Cinema

Norman K. Denzin

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PREFACE

“From the earliest-peep-show slapstick of Carry Nation doused in beer through the champagne drenched courtship in *Casablanca* and the drunken cackles of *Arthur* drinking and drunkenness have played significant but often invisible roles in the American cinema.”

(Herd and Room, 1982, p. 24)

“We should begin with . . . the way in which the cinema enters our lives.”

(Barthes, 1963/1985, p. 11)

This is a book about alcoholics and their places in Hollywood film between the years 1932¹ and 1989. My title, *Hollywood Shot By Shot: Alcoholism In American Cinema* is both playful and serious. For shot by shot, frame by frame, drink by drink, Hollywood has, for over a half century, presented drinking as a normal part of what ordinary and sophisticated people do when they engage in sociable behavior. But for every sober, normal, social drinker, there has been a deviant drinker, be that a sad or laughable “lush,” a slightly “giddy, tipsy” imbibers, or an out-and-out drunk.² This drinker’s decline would be charted, shot by shot, until he or she died, got sober, or was laughed off screen.

Hollywood’s treatment of this drinker has vacillated over the years between melodramatic tragedies, melodramas with happy endings, and comedies. This drinker’s deviance defined the normal drinker’s normality. In the alcoholism film Hollywood would focus on the problem drinker and turn his or her problems with alcohol into occasions for moralistic, didactic discussions of alcoholism and its destructive effects on the person and society. Films such as those analyzed in this work serve as distorted mirrors or fractured reflections of the American concern for its “alcoholism” problem.

Hence while alcoholism films presumably speak to the alcoholic’s presence in contemporary American life, they do so by creating a very specific type of discourse. They configure the alcoholic as a “diseased,” sick, often insane, violent person who violates the normal standards of everyday life. Films validate these representations by having persons in

positions of power, usually doctors and psychiatrists, but sometimes members of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) enunciate how and why the alcoholic is a sick person. These tellings are intended to shape what people come to believe and understand about alcoholism and recovery. They have significantly shaped public understandings of alcoholism as a disease and the alcoholic as a sick individual. In the process they alter lives, shape public attitudes, and make money for Hollywood (see Flemming and Manvell, 1985, pp. 138–39; Cook and Lewington, 1979).

In this sense alcoholism films reflect only one version or set of ideas about their subject matter, for example, the A.A. or the medical point of view. They are biased in other ways as well. As social problems films, their messages typically involve ways to treat the alcoholic's situation. They introduce models or pathways for recovery from alcoholism into the social order, including the love of a good woman (or man), A.A., will power, or a spiritual experience (see Room, 1985; Herd, 1986). All but a few (*Barfly*) are antialcoholism. At the same time many of them dress up reality in a way that gives it a sense of naturalness and history that does not correspond to the lived experiences of everyday individuals who are alcoholics. In so doing they may make recovery appear to be easier than it is in actuality, or they may exaggerate, for dramatic purposes, the negative effects of alcoholism on a family situation.

This Work

As a project in cultural and interpretive studies (Williams, 1977; Radway, 1985; Johnson, 1986/87; Carey, 1989; Hall, 1986; Denzin, 1989d, 1990d,e), this work builds on my earlier studies of the American alcoholic (Denzin, 1987a,b,c, 1989b,c,d,e, 1990a,b), which examined, in ethnographic fashion, the lived experiences of active and recovering alcoholics in American society. An unanswered question in these earlier works involved the representations of alcoholics in contemporary cultural texts, especially American film (see Denzin, 1987a, pp. 16–17; 1987b, p. 197; 1989e). While taking the position that lived experiences are shaped by larger meaning-making cultural structures, these earlier studies did not interrogate these broader social and cultural texts in terms of the meanings they convey about the alcoholic and alcoholism. The present work addresses this problem.

I attempt to uncover the recurring symbolic and interactional meanings Hollywood has brought to the alcoholic's experiences. I assume that a project in cultural-interpretive studies must examine how cultural texts, like alcoholism movies, create possibilities of experience that are then lived out in the lives of ordinary interacting individuals in the contemporary postmodern period (see Blumer, 1933 for an earlier exam-

ple of such work). A fully developed interpretive, cultural sociology of alcoholism (or anything else) would show how the cultural maps the terrains of interactional experience. I intend to offer a methodology and model of interpretation that can be applied not just to film, but to other cultural representations as well (see Denzin, 1990a,e).

By asking how one representational structure, the Hollywood alcoholism film, reflects society back to itself, I intend to speak to the more general problems that are involved in interpreting the relationship between conduct and the cultural representations of that conduct (for reviews of media effects on audiences, including film and television, see Sklar, 1975; Altheide, 1985; Radway, 1984; Jeffrey, 1986; Lindlof, 1987; Mukeřji and Schudson, 1986; Blumer, 1933). My problematics, at one level, are these: "How do cultural representations shape lived experience?" And "How do lived experiences shape their own cultural representations?" That is, how do we join cultural studies with interpretive analyses of the worlds of lived experience?³

Alcoholism films typify social experience. They create social types, draw on common stocks of knowledge in the social structure, and distribute that knowledge through their texts, and thereby create structures of interpretation for the movie-goer (see Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). These films draw the viewing self into a structure of experience that can only be subjectively constituted. They are sites for emotional experience. Their meanings lie in the interactions that go on between the viewer and the text. These meanings are emotional, and rooted in the viewer's biography. Indeed the impact of an alcoholism film lies, in part, in its ability to evoke an emotional identification with the film's protagonist(s) and its text. A film works, that is, to the degree that it creates an emotional relationship with the viewer.

Consider the following statements given by viewers of some of the films analyzed in this book. A 40-year-old male is sobering up in a detox center. He has been watching Robert Duvall play Mac Sledge, an alcoholic country-western singer in the film *Tender Mercies*.

That's me. I beat up the old lady, I used to play the music. Hell, if he can sober up I can too. I got help from these people in here. He didn't have this kinda help. (Denzin, 1989e, p. 53)

Another speaker, a recovering alcoholic, recounts an experience after the made-for-TV movie *My Name is Bill W.* was broadcast:

I got five phone calls from friends who told me they wondered if they had drinking problems. They knew I was in the Program (A.A.). One fellow from work said that that guy Bill Wilson acted just like he did when he got

drunk and he wondered if maybe he had the same problem. I told to come to a meeting and see if it felt right. He did and he's coming again tomorrow. I guess those shows get through to people. (Field interview, 15 April 1989)

A female alcoholic in A.A. describes her relationship with Kirsten in *Days of Wine and Roses*:

I can't watch her. The movie was on just the other night. I left the room when that motel scene came on and she was drunk and Joe came to get her. That was my mother. My dad sobered up in A.A. but mom never did. I never forgave her for dying a drunk. When I started having my problems with booze I remembered how Kirsten left her family and never came back. I didn't want to lose everything like mom did. (Field interview, 22 March, 1988)

The viewer brings a history to the text of any given film. By constituting concrete individuals as alcoholics, films create structures of experience that permit viewer identification. In this process of emotional identification the viewer brings the film into his (or her) life. A problem with drinking is then intensified. (Members attempt to fit the solutions to the problem that the film offers to their life experiences.)

When a film enters any individual's life it may simply entertain, and distract, or it may create new interpretations, or it may alter and reinforce, existing understandings (see Goffman, 1974, p. 562). In these ways it contributes to the member's participation in the structures of feeling (Williams, 1977, pp. 128–45), and systems of discourse and meaning that circulate in everyday popular culture (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 15–28). In certain of the examples above, these films served to move "alcoholics" from one system of discourse (the everyday) into another (A.A.).

Alcoholism films are, then, sites for phenomenological-interpretive study (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, pp. 58–59). They mirror and create, while they produce images, representations, and stories that simultaneously derive from, yet challenge the social worlds they attempt to map and interpret. By studying these films, and our reactions to them, we gain a greater understanding of how a cultural industry shapes public and private consciousness. In offering a historical and cultural reading of the many alcoholics who have appeared center-stage in American film over the last half-century, I will be treating films as cultural texts, assuming that they contain meanings and understandings that work their way through everyday life. An unraveling of these meanings should better expose the alcoholic's shifting place within American society. In these films Hollywood forces us to confront alcoholics and alcoholism. In

these pictures some of us find pictures of ourselves. Hence we study ourselves as we view and read about these films.

Ten chapters contain my analysis, which extends from 1932 to 1989. Chapter 1 presents an interpretive framework for reading the "alcoholism film." Chapter 2 examines comedy and the alcoholic. Chapters 3 to 5 take up the "alcoholism films" in the "classic modern period," 1932–1962, and discuss, in turn, the emergence of the alcoholic hero, heroine, and alcoholic family. Chapter 6 focuses on the years 1962–1980, when the "classic paradigm" waned and gave rise to alternative views of the alcoholic. In Chapters 7–9 I examine the contemporary period (1980–1989) and the appearance of the new "diseased" alcoholic family, heroine and hero. Chapter 10 comes full circle and offers a final, but provisional interpretive reading of the alcoholic's places in American film from 1932 to 1989. (The filmography lists all of the films analyzed, giving credit, cast, and production information.)⁵

Notes

1. The starting date of 1932 is not arbitrary. In that year *What Price Hollywood*, the earliest version of *A Star Is Born* cycle (1937, 1954, 1976), was released. With this film Hollywood offered its first major analysis of its own star system and the occupational causes of alcoholism. 1932 also signals the end of the temperance film and the beginning of the modern alcoholism film (see Chapter 1, Table 1).

2. Seven of ten American adults drink alcohol, at least occasionally (Denzin, 1987a, p. 16). Over 90 million Americans regularly use drugs, of one sort or another (Straus, 1982, pp. 140–41). There are over 12 million alcoholics in the United States; nearly one million belong to Alcoholics Anonymous. There are over 30 million adult children of alcoholics in the United States (Black, 1981), and over 4 million alcoholic families.

3. The present work primarily speaks to the cultural side of this problematic. The meanings and experiences that viewers, alcoholic and nonalcoholic, bring to, or have brought to the films I study are, with few exceptions, regrettably absent from my text. This is a major limitation that will be addressed in a subsequent work.

4. It is a common practice in alcoholism treatment centers to show films like the above to clients. One counselor comments, "We want them to see themselves. We want them to see alcoholics. . . . We want them to know they can get better" (Denzin, 1989e, p. 53). There is also another body of film, available on video cassette, that presents the "words of wisdom" of particular experts in the alcoholism field (i.e., Father Martin, Melody Beattie, etc.) and these videos are also shown in treatment centers.

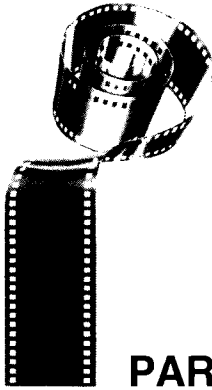
5. Although I have not attempted an inventory of every film that deals with alcoholics and alcoholism, I would appreciate learning about films that I should not have overlooked.



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PART I:

INTERPRETIVE STRUCTURES

The motion picture is one product which is never completely consumed for the very good reason that it is never entirely forgotten by those who see it. It leaves behind a residue, or deposit, or imagery and association, and this fact makes it a product unique to our tremendous list of export items.

(Mayer, 1947, p. 34, also quoted by Doane 1987, p. 37)

No cultural product works in isolation, but films are particularly interdependent in their meanings; partly because our reading of them relies on our knowledge and memory of generic conventions, and partly because the star system creates a complex pattern of links which also depends on our filmic memory and expectations. We remember the names of stars in mainstream films long after we have forgotten their fictional names, and meanings produced in one film will be carried over into another by the very presence of a particular actor or actress around which certain connotations have accrued.

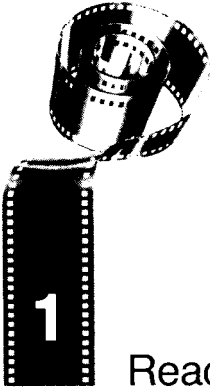
(Williamson, 1987, p. 23 in a review of *The Morning After*)



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Reading the Alcoholism Film

“Hollywood is in a rut. They don’t make movies, they remake them.”

(Billy Wilder, 1944/1970, p. 88)

This is an interpretive study of a particular category of Hollywood cinema—*the alcoholism film*; that movie in which the inebrity, alcoholism, and excessive drinking of one or more of the major characters is presented as a problem which the character, his or her friends, family, and employers, and other members of society self-consciously struggle to resolve (see Room, 1985, p. 1). Drinking, drunkenness, and alcoholism have played major and minor parts in American cinema since the early 1900s. Between the years 1908 and 1989 Hollywood made at least 600 alcoholism movies.¹ This is an analysis of a selected number of these films (see Table 1), chosen because they are considered to be the best representations of Hollywood’s shifting treatment of the alcoholic from the early modern period (1932) to the present (1989).

This investigation differs from earlier studies (Room, 1983a,b, 1985; Herd and Room, 1982; Herd, 1986; Roffman and Purdy, 1981; Cook and Lewington, 1979; McCormack, 1986; Steudler, 1987), which have been guided by purely historical, structural, or semiotic concerns. With few exceptions, this earlier work has not turned back on Hollywood as a meaning-making institution and analyzed in detail the systems of discourse and interpretation that have shaped the creation, definition, and production of alcoholism and the alcoholic subject. Nor have these works followed the evolution and development of the alcoholic subject in American film.

Interpretive Framework

I seek to delineate a complex, multidimensional theme. There is no single agreed-on thing called alcoholism, or alcoholic. The meanings of these terms are shaped by social, historical, medical, legal, literary, cultural, ideological, and interactional processes. Americans have always had an ambivalent attitude toward alcohol and the alcoholic, and this has been reflected in the films Hollywood has made about these topics. Americans want to drink and they do not want alcoholics. This has led to the alcoholism alibi. This alibi blames the problem drinker for his or her problems with alcohol. It argues that only a particular class of drinkers become alcoholic (e.g., those from alcoholic homes, or from drinking cultures that abuse alcohol). It offers an interpretive theory stressing moral (will power) and nonmoral (disease) explanations of the alcohol problem (see Beauchamp, 1980, p. 27).

Hollywood, as a meaning-producing, meaning-making social structure, like the social structure that it reflects, has, since its inception, been preoccupied with alcohol, drinking, the drunkard, the problem drinker, and the alcoholic. Since their inception the movies (and now television) have been the "most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States" (Sklar, 1975, p. 1). For nearly a century the alcoholism movies (along with other cultural texts) have defined the alcoholic and alcoholism for American society.

Hollywood's definitions of alcoholism and who an alcoholic is have shifted and changed, as broader, historical, cultural, medical, and ideological meanings changed. For example, films produced during the early silent era 1908–1920 (*The Cure*, *What Drink Did*) reflected the dry values of the temperance movement. They explained alcoholism as a failure of self will, stressed the evils of drink, punished the sinful drinker (heroes and heroines did not drink), and equated happiness with abstinence (Silverman, 1979, p. 295). Films during prohibition, contrary to the law, were wet, showing drinking in a favorable light (e.g., *Our Dancing Daughters*), although in 1931 two of the greatest figures of the silent film era, Charlie Chaplin and D. W. Griffith, produced antidrinking films in the older temperance tradition (*The Struggle* and *City Lights*).

More specifically, Hollywood's treatment of the alcoholic has been shaped by the following: the temperance movement and its legacies (1800–1919); prohibition (1920–1933), and repeal (1933); the development and elaboration of a film Production Code (1922–1934, 1968, 1972, Cook, 1981, pp. 214–15, 266–67, 426–27, 442–44) restricting what could be shown on screen; the emergence of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) as a national and then international social movement in 1935, coupled with the soon to follow National Council on Problems of Alcoholism in 1937,

and the National Council on Alcoholism in 1944; the production of literary works (e.g., *The Lost Weekend*, *I'll Cry Tomorrow*) and theatre plays (e.g., *The Country Girl*, *Come Back, Little Sheba*) telling stories about the alcoholic that could be adapted to the screen, and fitted to one or more film genres (e.g., comedy, family melodrama, western, women's film); a shift in national concern about alcoholism as a social problem that required treatment; the emergence of the social realist, social consciousness film within Hollywood (1944–1962, Ray, 1985), coupled with an understanding that successful box office films about alcoholics could be made. A brief discussion of each of these dimensions is required.

In 1922 the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association created the Hays Commission, a self-censoring body and a forerunner to the Production Code of 1934, which set in place a series of edicts defining the moral value system represented in Hollywood films. Individuals could not be shown breaking the law. Violence and sexual intimacy could not be presented. The code was quite explicit on drinking. The use of liquor in American life, when not required by the plot, or for purpose of characterization, will not be shown." The Production Code restricted the actual showing of drinking on screen. It was challenged in the late 1940s, and throughout the 1950s (Cook, 1981, pp. 443–44), with the rise of social consciousness, social problems films.

Alcoholics Anonymous was formed in 1935. In 1937 the National Council on Problems of Alcoholism was created. The purpose of this Council, which contained early A.A. leaders, was to "stimulate inquiry into the problems of alcoholism, rather than to inflame moral and emotional passions." In 1944 the National Committee for the Education on Alcoholism, an offshoot of the National Council, emerged and began advocating three simple principles: alcoholism is a disease; the alcoholic is treatable and deserves help; and alcoholism is a public health problem. The National Council immediately began to lobby Hollywood to produce films that embodied these three ideas (Johnson, 1973). In 1945 the first modern alcoholism film, *The Lost Weekend*, was released. It was based on Charles Jackson's novel of the same name, which was an immediate national best seller when it appeared in 1944. Billy Wilder, the director, consulted with A.A. when he made his film version of Jackson's novel. *The Lost Weekend* located alcoholism solidly in the upper-middle classes. Prior to this film (1932–1945) Hollywood had focused its attention primarily on the entertainment industry, and the production of alcoholism films focused on problems of alcoholic stars within the Hollywood System (e.g., *What Price Hollywood?* 1932, *A Star Is Born*, 1937). *The Lost Weekend* was quickly followed by at least 28 films (1945–1962) that took the alcoholic and his or her drinking as their sole, or primary focus (see Room, 1985).

Between the years 1932 and 1945 the above factors came together and produced the conditions necessary for the emergence of the modern, anti-temperance alcoholism movie. Table 1 presents an historical overview of Hollywood's treatment of the alcoholic in the twentieth century. It delineates the key temporal divisions of my study, and lists the films I will be examining.

The five temporal divisions of my study require brief discussion. Because the temperance and Prohibition phases have already been discussed (see also Herd and Room, 1982; Silverman, 1979), only the preclassic, the classic, the interregnum, and the present require discussion. *The preclassic period* references films like *A Star Is Born* (1937) where excessive drunkenness is represented, treatment is offered, but there is

Table 1. *Hollywood's Treatment of the Alcoholic in the Twentieth Century*

Temperance 1909-1920	Prohibition 1921-1934	Preclassic 1935-1945	Classic 1945-1962	Interregnum 1960-1980	Present 1980-
		Representative Films			
<i>The Cure</i> ^a	<i>The Struggle</i> ^a <i>What Price</i> <i>Hollywood</i>	<i>A Star Is</i> <i>Born</i>	<i>Lost</i> <i>Weekend</i> <i>Come Fill</i> <i>The Cup</i> <i>Harvey</i> <i>Smash-Up</i> <i>I'll Cry</i> <i>Tomorrow</i> <i>A Star Is</i> <i>Born</i> <i>Come Back</i> <i>Little</i> <i>Sheba</i> <i>Days of</i> <i>Wine and</i> <i>Roses</i> <i>Country</i> <i>Girl</i> <i>Key Largo</i>	<i>Fat City</i> <i>The Graduate</i> ^a <i>Woman Under</i> <i>the</i> <i>Influence</i> <i>W.C. Fields</i> <i>and Me</i> <i>Lady Sings</i> <i>the Blues</i> <i>A Star Is</i> <i>Born</i>	<i>Tender Mercies</i> <i>Shattered</i> <i>Spirits</i> <i>Under the</i> <i>Influence</i> <i>Only When I</i> <i>Laugh</i> <i>Arthur</i> <i>Life of the</i> <i>Party</i> <i>Cracker</i> <i>Factory</i> <i>Betty Ford</i> <i>Story</i> <i>Morning After</i> <i>Arthur 2</i> <i>Ironweed</i> <i>Verdict</i> <i>Paris, Texas</i> <i>Under the</i> <i>Volcano</i> <i>Hoosiers</i> <i>8 Million</i> <i>Ways to Die</i> <i>Barfly</i> <i>Clean and</i> <i>Sober</i> <i>My Name Is</i> <i>Bill W.</i>
N 10+	151+	40+	28+	400+	36+ = 664

Sources: Krafur (1976), Munden (1971), Room (1985), and Magill (1986).

^aNot examined in this study.

no consideration of a disease concept of the condition, nor is the word alcoholism used. In the *classic (modern) period*, the condition is named, alcoholism is presented as a disease, a medical vocabulary describing it is presented, and Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) becomes an option for treatment. Males, females, and families get this condition in the classic period, which ends with *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962). The *interregnum* corresponds to the fall in popularity of social realist films, the rise in importance of television as the carrier of cultural messages about alcoholism, and the movie-of-the-week treatment of a variety of social problems, including teenage alcoholism (e.g., *Sarah T.—Portrait of a Teenage Alcoholic*, 1975) incest, sexual violence, and drug addiction (see Gabbard and Gabbard, 1987, pp. 112–14). It extends from 1960 to 1980 and falls into three phases. From 1960 to 1966 an alcoholic drinker is presented, but his or her problems are not connected to alcoholism (e.g., *The Graduate*). Between 1966 and 1976 excessive alcohol and drug use are presented as non problematic recreational activities (e.g., **M*A*S*H**). The classic illness model reappears in 1976 (e.g., *A Star Is Born*) and continues to 1980. The *present*, or contemporary (postmodern) period continues the themes started at the end of the interregnum, only now alcoholism becomes a clear-cut family disease, which also involves drug abuse (e.g., cocaine addiction).

My investigation charts the transformations of alcoholism and the alcoholic's situation through these five time periods. I give greatest emphasis to the classic and present moments, with equal attention to films that focus, in turn, on the comic alcoholic, or funny drunk, the alcoholic hero, heroine, and the alcoholic family. I use the comic, or funny drunk (e.g., *Harvey*, *Arthur*) as my initial point of reference, because, as Silverman (1979, p. 288) observes, "Americans through the years have loved to laugh at the boozer." The alcoholism comedies are contrasted to the more serious, and usually melodramatic treatment of the alcoholic's situation. The "happy drunk" comedies keep this safe version of problem drinking alive in the viewing culture.

Film, Everyday Life, and the Cultural Study of Alcoholism

Sociologists have been slow to use film in their studies of alcoholism (see Herd, 1986; Steudler, 1987, p. 46; Room, 1985; McCormack, 1986), yet how a society cinematically represents itself to its members warrants serious sociological study. In the main sociologists have confined their studies of the alcoholic to those methods that generate sociologically defined information on the incidence and correlates of alcoholism, including the following: (1) numbers, tables, graphs, charts and figures,

and complex accounts of social trends, and social indicators; (2) data archives and coded categories of the glossed drinking practices of native and primitive peoples; (3) thick descriptions of everyday alcoholic life including ethnographies and life histories; (4) subject quotes from interviews; and (5) attitude reports from surveys (see Cahalan, 1987; Gomberg, 1982; but for exceptions Gusfield, 1963; Herd, 1986; Levine, 1978; room, 1983a).

The Patriarchal Bias

This sociological work has often reflected a patriarchal, male, interpretive bias (Herd, 1986; McCormack, 1986; Steudler 1987; Lerner, 1986; Mitchell, 1984; Richardson, 1981). It has relegated women's perspectives to the margins of the social. In the process it has sustained the traditional belief that "objective" accounts of the social can be given (Barthes, 1957/1972, p. 12), but this belief has equated masculinity with objectivity, and femininity with subjectivity. It has served to obscure the patriarchal bias at the core of the scientific study of alcoholism (Gomberg, 1982, p. 344). Like myth, these documents have reproduced the gender stratification systems of postmodern society. Their depictions and stories of the social, "natural" relations between (alcoholic) men and women have typically been told, seen, and written about through the masculine gaze and voice (see Clough, 1988a,b). My intentions are to reverse these patterns.

Enter Film

Steudler (1987), following Barthes' (1957/1972, pp. 11, 26–28, 56–57, 1981) more general studies of cinema, have challenged those sociologists of everyday life who study alcoholism and deviance to develop a sociology of film. Here I accept this challenge, arguing that the interpretive study of alcoholism must deal with the cultural, filmic representations of intimate, emotional, alcoholic relationships as these social forms are contained within the "alcoholism" film.

Alcoholism films are simultaneously visual records of, and a part of, everyday life (Steudler, 1987, p. 46).² These records and representations structure lived experience: they set fashion (going to A.A.), keep tradition and new, emerging cultural understandings alive (e.g., alcoholism is a disease), record tabooed acts (incest, the violent insanity of alcoholics, etc.), and ceremonialize the sacred (recovery). These films are interactional productions. They do not simply assert their truths, "rather we interact with them in order to arrive at conclusions" (Becker, 1986, p. 279). Alcoholism films express particular versions of the social imagination, including the understandings in the 1940s and 1950s that alco-

holism was a treatable disease. Such films represent what is “immediately apparent in a given society” (Steudler, 1987, p. 46; e.g., alcoholism is a social problem,). They also allow “the needs, desires and dreams of a period to be projected” into the realms of the social (Steudler, 1987, p. 46; e.g., sobriety for middle-class alcoholics). Films, in this regard, are the perfect site for the Durkheimian analysis of society, culture, drinking, and alcoholism. They encapsulate “the sensitivity, aspirations and dreams of societies in particular historical and sociological situations” (Morin, 1984, p. 402). They have become the repositories of the collective consciousness and subconsciousness of postmodern culture.

Ideology and Film

A basic thesis, already suggested, structures my argument. All representations of cultural experience are ideological and hence must be read for the multiple meanings that are contained within their texts (see Clough, 1988a; Balsamo, 1988, 1989).³ Alcoholism films do not faithfully reproduce reality. A film “screens” and frames reality to fit particular ideological, or distorted images of “real” social relationships (Steudler, 1987, p. 46). Any film will be a site for the play of multiple ideological versions of reality. Sociological analysis must uncover the ideological distortions that are embedded within any film’s text (see below). How a culture-making institution functions can then be analyzed. As a film attempts to build its particular version of reality, in which one set of events is seen as naturally causing another, contradictions and inconsistencies will appear. (For example, in *Days of Wine and Roses*, why does Kirsten, who values family, walk away from her husband and child?) A subversive reading of ideology attempts to uncover these inconsistencies, which lie within the “mythical” structure the film creates (see Barthes, 1957/1972, p. 11).

In representing multiple, contradictory versions of reality, an alcoholism film manages to reflect the very reality it distorts. That is, the contradictions and distortions that are represented are themselves drawn from the contradictions that exist in everyday life. Hence in the 1960s there were women alcoholics like Kirsten who refused to join A.A., and in the 1950s there were housewives like Lola, in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, who were regarded as failures by their neighbors and husbands. There were also women who recovered in A.A., men who walked away from their families and rejected A.A., and housewives who were not like Lola or Kirsten. The distortions that film produces open up corners of everyday life “we had ended up forgetting—that had become, as it were, unfamiliar” (Steudler, 1987, p. 47). In opening up these corners of reality, and by exaggerating particular sets of experi-

ences over others (i.e., the negative as opposed to the positive sides of recovery), films perpetuate stereotypes, fears and anxieties that exist in the culture at large.

However, the visions of real life that the film projects are as valid, or as truthful as any other (Steudler, 1987, p. 47). Truth is always partial, incomplete, and based on a group's or individual's perspective (Becker, 1986, pp. 280–81). The statements that a film makes bear the stamp of the cultural, social, and economic contexts that surround the filmmaker's work. The film is also the product of teamwork, and of political economies of production, distribution, and consumption. Any film, in turn, builds on patterns of meaning and action that exist in the society at large. In so doing it modifies those patterns of meaning, and creates new experiences for viewers. In this way film creates the realities it reproduces on the screen.

A Note on Method

The readings that I will offer involve using narrative as interpretive materials. Although sociologists are accustomed to narrative analyses of interview data (Maines, 1989, 1990) they have less frequently regarded the narrative materials of film or literature as legitimate subject matter. (Indeed, with the exceptions noted above, they have ignored the alcoholism film entirely.) The method that I employ elaborates Hall (1980) who has distinguished three ways to read a cultural text: (1) the hegemonic reading, which takes the reading preferred by the dominant cultural ideology; (2) the negotiated reading, "which attempts to maintain the preferred reading in tandem with the understandings drawn from a class [or gender] position" (Gledhill, 1978; 1978/1985, p. 827); and (3) the oppositional reading, which "transforms the readings offered by the dominant ideology into . . . an oppositional discourse" (Gledhill, 1978/1985, p. 827).

In the present context I will use the term "realist reading" to subsume Hall's hegemonic and negotiated readings, and the term "subversive reading" to reference his oppositional reading. I will argue, after Hall, that ideological meanings are encoded, or built into texts. [(The term decoding refers to how these meanings are read from the text (see Grossberg, 1986, p. 67).] This way of "reading," or interpreting a cultural text differs significantly from what within American sociology has recently been called "cultural sociology" (see Wuthnow, 1987, p. 6; Denzin, 1990d,e).

Strategically, my method involves the following steps. First, obtaining a record of a cultural text (a film, a novel, a scientific article) and subjecting that document to multiple readings (see Denzin, 1987d,

1989e,f for examples). Second, delineating the narrative (story) themes that are present in the text, in particular noting the uses and meanings brought to alcohol, drinking, and the alcoholic. Third, collecting the realist, hegemonic, preferred interpretations of the text (see Denzin, 1989f for an example). In this study these interpretations were based on a reading of the reviews received by each film, as catalogued in Salem (1971, 1982), *Filmfacts*, Magill (1986), *Film Review Annual*, *The New York Times Film Review Index*, and *Newspaper Abstracts*. The reviews included those printed in the popular press (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Republic*), as well as those appearing in more formal, contemporary scholarly film review journals, e.g., *Cineaste*, *Film Review Quarterly*. Recent sociological (and other) readings of key films from each historical period (e.g., Herd, 1986; Room, 1985; Roffman and Purdy, 1981; Cook and Lewington, 1979) are also analyzed. Fourth, interpreting those readings in terms of their dominant ideological meanings (see Chapter 10 for an intensive, comparative analysis of these reviews). Fifth, developing a subversive, feminist reading of the text, realizing that there will always be multiple subversive and realist interpretations. Sixth, contrasting the subversive, oppositional readings to the "realist" interpretations. Seventh, if possible, securing viewer's and reader's interpretations of the document and connecting these meanings to the experiences of viewers and readers (see Davis, 1989). This method will necessarily work from one case (cultural document) to another as the sociologist builds up interpretations of how particular bodies of cultural work create recurring ideological meanings for viewers and readers.

Selecting the Films

As indicated I am analyzing what I regard as the best exemplars of the alcoholism film. All of these films share one or more of the following characteristics. They (1) are regarded as classics (e.g., *Lost Weekend*), (2) are included on the lists of other researchers, reviewers, and critics (e.g., Room, 1985; Roffman and Purdy, 1981), (3) record the entrance, and then the shifting presence and meaning of A.A. (*Come Fill The Cup*, 1951, *Come Back*, *Little Sheba*, 1952, *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, 1955, *Days of Wine and Roses*, 1962, *8 Million Ways to Die*, 1986, *My Name Is Bill W.*, 1989), and (4) reflect Hollywood's changing treatment of the alcoholic hero, heroine, and alcoholic family. I also gave primary attention to films that had been nominated for awards (see Filmography), or were current top video rentals, or big moneymakers when they were released, using these criteria as measures of the film's popularity and importance. Each decade since the 1930s has seen the production of at least one major annual

top moneymaking Hollywood alcoholism film. The following films are the all-time film rental leaders for their decade: *A Star Is Born* for the 1930s, *Lost Weekend* for the 1940s, *Harvey*, *A Star Is Born*, *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, and *Country Girl* for the 1950s, *Cat Ballou* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for the 1960s, *A Star Is Born* and *The Rose* for the 1970s, *Only When I Laugh*, *Arthur*, *Tender Mercies*, *The Morning After*, *Hoosiers*, *The Verdict*, and *Sea of Love* for the 1980s (see *Variety*, 1990).⁴

Defining the Genre

A provisional, working definition of the alcoholism film may be given. (This definition will be reexamined in Chapter 10 once the 36 films in this study have been fully discussed.) These films appear to be marked by the following four features. First, a central character, as argued above, will be characterized as having a problem with alcohol. Second, the narrative will show the main character drinking, not drinking, trying to stop drinking, sometimes drinking again, being tested by a crisis situation, not drinking, and finally establishing a sober, or drunken lifestyle. Third, the end of the alcoholism film will position the alcoholic either back in society, with a family and a job, or outside society, leaving family and work behind. (This trajectory will vary by the gender of the alcoholic.) Fourth, sobriety will be accomplished in one of several ways: (1) the loving care of a woman or man, (2) a spiritual experience, (3) the intervention of treatment centers and A.A., or (4) will-power (see Herd, 1986). Finally, the alcoholic may be presented in "heroic" dimensions (see Chapter 3).

The Alcoholism Film as a Social Problems Film

These characteristics define the alcoholism as a genre, or special type of film.⁵ They are ideal-typical formulations, seldom fully present in any film, although they will reach their fullest expression in the late 1980s with *Clean and Sober* (1988) and *My Name Is Bill W.* (1989). This genre is a variant of the social problems film and thus stands in line with films about mental illness and madness, the juvenile delinquent and the ex-con, poverty and unemployment, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, racism, drug addiction, incest, family violence, rape, and pornography (see Roffman and Purdy, 1981; Flemming and Manvell, 1985). In the "Golden era" of Hollywood (1930s to mid 1950s) the social problems film emerged as a specific genre, or type of film.⁶ A product of the Depression, they receded in wartime; and then accelerated in production near the end of the war.

Like other films made in this era, they were shaped, as noted above, by the Hollywood formula and the Production Codes of the time (Roff-

man and Purdy, 1981, pp. 1–2). This formula (Roffman and Purdy, 1980, pp. 1–7) conformed to several conventions embodied in the Production Code (Roffman and Purdy, 1980, p. 6; Sklar, 1975, pp. 173–74, 294–96) including producing films that both entertained and educated moviegoers on the central democratic values of American society, i.e., the myths of success, the values of family, home, romantic love, and hard work. These movies, as noted, avoided profanity, and the showing of intimate sexuality, or presenting violence in a positive light. This led to films that borrowed the format of the Victorian melodrama. The narratives are (and were) organized around the poles of good and evil. Heroes and heroines, the good people, are placed in conflict with villains and evil, sexually attractive women and men who tempt them. Heroes and heroines overcome evil and temptation and are rewarded by the love of a “good” woman or man and a place in a respectable, middle-class family. These films, with their happy endings, oedipalized family relations and “situated subjectivity in the system of marriage and kinship . . . and made a subject’s succession to power and recognition coterminous with sexually proper self-development” (Clough, 1989, p. 4).

In these films a societal condition, a personal problem, a character flaw, a deviant or violent act, or a stigma is turned into a dramatic device that permits the filmmaker to make moral, political, and ideological comments about the individual, his or her problem, and the larger society that contains, creates, and reacts to that problem. Their distinguishing feature is didacticism; they attempt to teach and inform an audience about a problem and its solution (Roffman and Purdy, 1981, p. viii). They are, with few exceptions (*Barfly*), antialcoholism.

The alcoholism variant of these films often embodied wish fulfillment, romance, and true love, as they worked out the good–evil, sobriety–alcoholism conflict. In the end of such films evil is destroyed and good is rewarded. These films kept (and keep) fantasies alive. The formula that organized them could be fitted to any social problem. It is this framework that the alcoholism film builds on, typically pitting the alcoholic, not against an institution, but against himself or herself and the disease of alcoholism.

Emotionality in the Alcoholism Film

Alcoholism films are sites for emotional struggle. Four structures of experience shape the intimate relations that create and constrain emotionality in the alcoholism film (Denzin, 1990b). These are the alcoholic drinking act and the euphoric and depressive effects of alcohol on conduct; the absence of alcohol and the negative effects of sobriety on intimacy in the relationship; alcohol drinking desire and sexuality,