Spirits of Cinema
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I’ve been doing it for years, but I still do not understand why I—or anyone—would drink at the movies. My practice began shortly after I turned twenty-one, at the New Parkway Theater in Oakland, California, once known as the Parkway Speakeasy. There you could order beer and pizza while watching the big screen from the comfort of an old couch. The couches weren’t all that clean, but they were cleaner than the couches at the student co-op where I lived. I also liked the novelty of drinking legally at an institution that I’d been taught to associate with wholesome family fun.

Alcohol and filmgoing are not an obvious mix. Alcohol increases dopamine and endorphin production, which is why people enjoy it as part of a festive night out, but it also disrupts sensory perception, including the aesthetic experience of a film.1 After one drink, when a person’s blood alcohol content (BAC) reaches 0.02 to 0.03 percent, they begin to experience slight euphoria and lightheadedness. After two drinks, when one’s BAC reaches 0.05 to 0.09 percent, inhibitions start to drop, reaction times slow, and “sight and hearing are diminished because the brain does not process input as rapidly.”2 Doctors have found that a BAC as low as 0.08 percent can induce “alterations in the visual system that are related, for instance, to color perception, contrast sensitivity, as well as on eye movements,” which correlate with visual attention.3 Alcohol is also a diuretic, so drinking dramatically increases the odds that a viewer will have to run to the restroom sometime during a show.4

Alcohol is unique among theatrical concessions in its ability to disrupt viewers’ moviegoing. Popcorn may be loud and hot dogs messy, but they don’t impair a person’s vision or their ability to follow a plot. Nevertheless, more and more theaters are adding alcohol to their concession stands or building lobby bars to encourage patrons to drink before, during, and after the film. In 1997, only 14 theaters in the United States served alcohol in their lobbies or in the auditorium itself. By 2005, that number had risen to 270.5 By 2017, thirty-two states allowed alcoholic beverages to be sold in approximately 700 movie theaters, making adult concessions “the fastest-growing amenity in our industry,” according to George Patterson, the senior vice president of food and beverage for AMC.6 If a given cinema isn’t serving, it’s likely due to a municipal, county, or state law passed in the wake of Prohibition that proscribes alcohol sales at such establishments. Theater owners and industrial associations are hiring lobbyists to get those laws changed, though, because “adult concessions” are keeping exhibitors afloat, even as they fundamentally change U.S. cinema culture.

The twenty-first-century shift toward solden spectatorship is not without precedent. Alcohol has flowed through cinema history since the Lumière brothers’ first commercial exhibition in the Salon Indien of Paris’s Grand Café on December 28, 1895. Inebriants also infused early film theory as writers struggled to make sense of the intoxicating effects of these new motion pictures—and, who knows, maybe the drinks they were consuming with them. Understanding these histories helps explain the myriad appeal of boozing in theaters today. It not only fosters an air of transgression but also has specific implications for how viewers engage certain films and film cultures. Drinking can enhance less than enthralling movies and help viewers emulate characters’ intoxication, further immersing them in the film’s world. Alcohol sales also support and honor unique viewing environments, especially when the exhibitor in question relies on alcohol sales to keep the projector running.

For decades, drinking in movie theaters was frowned upon because of negative class associations with concessions. As theater historians Christine Woodworth and Amy E. Hughes observe, such prejudices date to the sixteenth century when theatrical productions in America were frequently staged in “taverns and taprooms.” These unsavory origins would haunt theatrical concessions for centuries as temperance reformers tried to bring tipplers to heel. From the nineteenth century forward, “dismay concerning the consumption of food and drink in the theater was directed especially at venues that openly and proudly catered to immigrants and working-class audiences.”7 When these demographics also produced early and ardent film fans, the reformers’ suppositions about concessions migrated to the nickelodeon. Nevertheless, fin-de-siècle tavern culture may have facilitated film’s rapid popular rise.8
they know will be less than fantastic. What if the theater sold some kind of concession that would lower their standards, making the jokes seem funnier and the plot less cumbersome? Adding real vodka to cine-vodka calms the inner critic by dousing it with dopamine and impeding the perception of aesthetic details that wouldn't reward close scrutiny anyway.

I wish I had the strength of character to reach for good art at the end of a long day, but sometimes comfort comes from Charlize Theron as a smart, glamorous secretary of state falling for a homely journalist (Seth Rogen) while also running for president. That's the gist of Long Shot (Jonathan Levine, 2019). Everything about the movie conveys timeliness—from the overqualified female candidate to the TV-obsessed idiot in the White House (a genuinely amusing turn by Bob Odenkirk) to the beautiful but image-obsessed Canadian prime minister (played by Alexander Skarsgård). As David Edelstein points out, though, the movie only "feels as if it has bite—even when it’s gumming you to death."15

For my viewing companion and myself, such feelings were helped along by a couple of lagers (him) and two glasses of merlot (me). I already suspected that Long Shot wasn’t going to profit from uncompromised engagement, but I wanted to see the film and enjoy it. Drinking allowed me to overlook the movie’s shortcomings in the moment. These include a major plot point that is also a riff on the stoner-comedy subgenre: movies about consuming cannabis and the funny things that happen under its influence.20 These films can be watched sober, of course, but the episodic

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The Grand Café de Paris c. 1900.

Early film culture often thrived in proximity to public houses. Indeed, one of the most famous movie exhibitors in the history of cinema got his start in the back of a tavern: the Freedman House in Forest City, Pennsylvania, where Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel began tending bar in 1907. When an event room in the rear of the tavern became available in 1908, Roxy came up with a plan to turn it into “a mixed-use vaudeville theater and roller-skating rink.” After the Family Theater opened there on December 24, 1908, the Freedman House “served as the de facto lobby of the theater.”19

Growing national enthusiasm for Prohibition would soon cleave theaters and taverns. “By the early 1910s,” Cynthia Baron reports, “pressure by citizens’ groups” led U.S. exhibitors to favor soda and candy rather than beer or hard liquor.10 But over in Europe, film theorists had already begun pondering the phenomenological similarities between alcohol and the movies. Dziga Vertov famously compared audience-pleasing Hollywood films to “cine-vodka” and claimed that “on the movie-house *habitaté*, the ordinary fiction film acts like a cigar or cigarette on a smoker. Intoxicated by the cine-nicotine, the spectator sucks from the screen the substance which soothes his nerves.”11 Writing in 1960, Siegfried Kracauer observed a trend “from the twenties to the present day” of comparing film “to a sort of drug” that “lulls the mind” with “stupifying effects.”12 Citing Jean Epstein, Kracauer argues that just as “doping creates dope addicts . . . the cinema has its habitués who frequent it out of an all but physiological urge.”13 “Film addicts,” he concludes, seek “the drugging effect of the medium” in order to experience the illusion of omnipotence over a world that presents itself to them.14

Movies can be intoxicating, but inebriated spectatorship enriches the viewing experience in distinct and noteworthy ways. For instance, drinking can make a lackluster film more entertaining. Now and then, everyone goes to a movie

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rhythm of their humor and their questionable commitment to narrative causality mean that they’re funnier if stoned.

The same dynamic applies to teen comedies about finding alcohol and other inebriants, such as Olivia Wilde’s *Booksmart* (2019). In this queer feminist farce, high school valedictorian Molly (Beanie Feldstein) and salutatorian Amy (Kaitlyn Dever) realize belatedly that they didn’t need to avoid partying to get into college. With one night left until graduation, they’re determined to go out and get wasted before it’s too late. As is often the case, it takes most of the movie for Molly and Amy to find the blowout they’re looking for (although they do unwittingly consume some drug-laced strawberries along the way). Eager audience members can anticipate the young women’s revelry, however, by entering the theater with drinks already in hand. A little libation doesn’t just increase narrative excitement; it places viewers in the protagonists’ desired frame of mind, helping them to participate vicariously in the on-screen quest.

Many exhibitors are cashing in on drinking as a means to enhance filmic immersion by designing specialty cocktails that reflect a movie’s cast, creators, or themes. The Nitehawk Cinema in Brooklyn—one of the country’s most prominent independent cine-bistros—created a “Wilde and Free” aperitif to encourage *Booksmart* viewers to imbibe. Featuring “El Dorado white rum, California citrus, Prosecco, lime, [and] ground mace,” the mix sounds much more appealing than the Midori-based concoction that AMC invented to help promote *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (Michael Dougherty, 2019). Theater managers aver that movie-themed drinks tend to be quite popular with audiences, second only to beer as the theatrical drink of choice. Yet the appeal of these drinks lies less in their gustatory resemblances to images and stories on-screen than in the opportunity they offer to chemically further one’s involvement in a story world. With a “Wilde and Free” in hand, the viewer isn’t just watching Molly and Amy get drunk, or getting drunk in preparation for their drunkenness, but indulging in a synesthetic cocktail that itself blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality.

Sipping my beer in the third row, I did not exactly feel like I was drinking alongside the characters of *Booksmart*, but there was nevertheless a meaningful sense of drinking with them. My inebriation developed in parallel with Molly's.
and Amy’s increasingly ridiculous escapades, for a while anyway. Shortly after they reached their destination, I realized that I was sobering up. At that point, my choices were to leave the theater, forsaking the movie in favor of another drink, or to relinquish my intoxication just as the young women finally achieve theirs. Drinking enhances a movie for only so long; when the booze runs out or overwhelms the senses, viewers must face the realization that they are not actually part of the scene on-screen. Chemicals can do just so much for so long; the temporality of spectatorship never fully coincides with the temporality of the narrative.29

There are viewing situations, however, where the temporality of intoxication is less significant than the sense of space and occasion that drinking creates. These include theater franchises organized around machismo and beer—such as the Alamo Drafthouse—as well as repertory houses and microcinemas that cultivate communities of film-historical appreciation and fund those efforts through alcohol sales. I live in Washington, DC, where adult concessions undergird the business plans of nonprofit community theaters (the Avalon), national arts organizations (the American Film Institute Silver Theater and Cultural Center), and microcinemas, including Suns Cinema in DC’s Mount Pleasant neighborhood.

The term “microcinema” was coined by San Francisco exhibitors Rebecca Barten and David Sherman in 1993 and denotes an unconventional, amateur, or even unsanctioned viewing space that develops and supports social connection through film.20 When attached to bars, microcinemas muddle film and booze like mint and lime in a mojito: it’s not always clear whether patrons are there for a movie with booze or for booze with a movie. In the end, each facilitates the consumption of the other—as well as a sense of community congregation that other cinemas do not offer. While the Alamo, Avalon, and AFI Silver all have bars where one can sit and talk, their exhibition cultures do not privilege local histories and taste communities, as microcinemas do. Suns maintains a unique relationship to adult concessions that is less about enhanced viewing than enhancing the communal and creative life of the neighborhood.

Suns opened in May 2016 with funding from a Kickstarter campaign and the goal of turning an informal local screening series—Uncle David’s Film Nights—into a brick-and-mortar institution.21 The storefront cinema features a wooden bar and mismatched living-room furniture on its ground floor and a thirty-seat screening space upstairs. Ticket sales just about cover the licensing fees for the films Suns exhibits: offbeat, often cult titles chosen to reflect local enthusiasms and events. All other expenses are financed through concession sales; indeed, co-owner David Cabrera acknowledges that Suns’s entire business model is “contingent upon selling alcohol.” Still, Cabrera also sees the theater as having “a moral responsibility” to the community it entered.22

A historically Latinx neighborhood in Northwest Washington, Mount Pleasant has gentrified rapidly in the last ten years, becoming whiter and more affluent. Cabrera and his fellow programmers work with local filmmakers and community organizers to make sure that Suns serves Mount Pleasant residents and remains part of local culture rather than eclipsing it. Selling alcohol helps with this goal. Were it not for the bar—where patrons can choose between Pabst Blue Ribbon, local microbrews, red or white wine (varietals not specified), and house cocktails like ‘Averna Herzog Eats His Shoe’—Suns might be just another chain store or Starbucks. At Suns, drinking actively fosters community, both by keeping the lights on (or off, as the case may be) and by encouraging spontaneous engagement with other viewers.

Suns is not the only theater financially sustained by adult concession sales. Put simply, alcohol is the first new, independent source of revenue that exhibitors have found in years. Ticket prices have continued to rise as theaters have added features like IMAX projection, Dolby Atmos sound systems, and leather recliners, but exhibitors must share up to 90 percent of their ticket revenue with distributors. Food and drink have therefore been exhibitors’ main revenue stream for decades. Adult beverages slightly reduce the relative profit margin on concessions—from about 80 percent to around 66 percent, according to Virginia theater owner Fred Schoenfeld—but that’s nothing compared with the split on ticket sales.23 For that reason, many

The bar at Washington, DC’s Suns Cinema.
exhibitors now consider themselves restaurateurs and barkeeps first, programmers second. This change does not have to be feared, but it must be recognized as a change. Whether any given viewer imbibes or not, the metabolism of U.S. cinema now depends on alcohol.

Notes
8. In his textbook American Film: A History, Jon Lewis maintains that “films in those early days were also shown in saloons (over and over again, in some cases)” Michael Aronson argues that by the turn of the twentieth century, “local taverns, according to some scholars, were likely a popular site for early movie exhibition,” but he does not name his sources. Jon Lewis, American Film: A History (New York: Norton, 2007), 15; Michael Aronson, Nickelodeon City: Pittsburgh at the Movies, 1905–1929, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 174.
16. Other stoner comedies include Dazed and Confused (Richard Linklater, 1993), Friday (F. Gary Gray, 1995), Half Baked (Tamra Davis, 1998), and Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle (Danny Leiner, 2004).
19. Slasher movies make great drinking films for this very reason; as characters’ carefree antics give way to violence and terror, the viewer sober up, too. Tate Taylor’s Ma (2019) harnesses this timing delightfully.