

Article 15
by AUTHOR

Very few things pull me out of a movie faster than watching an actor unconvincingly act like they're drunk. Gas prices in old movies, cheap CGI, people holding coffee cups with no liquid in them—none of that bothers me as much as watching someone try to fake like they're out of their mind and out of control. As an alcoholic, I know that drunkenness takes many shapes and shades—not just one default setting of staggering around and slurring words. In recovery, I'm desperate to reconcile who I was and what I used to be like. Seeing any shred of my alcoholic self in films, books and TV shows helps put my past to rest—no matter how small the moment.

Pop culture has always had a weird, indelible hold over me. I wanted to believe that sitcom apartments were actual environments, that I could spot my friend Samantha's house in the credits to *WKRP in Cincinnati*, and that the miniature neighborhood in that old 1980s "HBO Feature Movie Presentation" intro was real. It's only natural that when I first got sober, I didn't look for examples of it in my daily life. It's not like I could easily kick over the nearest rock and find fellow recovering alcoholics like me squirming around in the dirt. No, I scoured my DVD collection. It reminded me of going to Blockbuster Video the day after 9/11 and finding every terrorist thriller and apocalyptic movie checked out. Every single one. *Armageddon*, *The Siege*, *Deep Impact*. I remember realizing that people just wanted to see how close Hollywood had gotten to the real thing—how close those visions of destruction and carnage had been. Newly sober, I felt the same urgent need to find films that reflected what I'd gone through; I needed to view my life through fiction.

I suddenly leaned on pop culture to be responsible, accurate, and tell the truth about alcoholism when, in reality, I'm positive not a ton of thought went into most of it. I already knew all the classic movie alcoholics: Paul Newman in *The Verdict*, Billy Bob Thornton in *Bad Santa*, Walter Matthau in *The Bad News Bears*, and Dudley Moore in *Arthur*. (Side note: if you can make it through the entirety of the *Arthur* trailer and Moore's hyena laugh, you're better than me.) Just like how you notice sad lyrics in songs when you've broken up with someone, alcoholics started to emerge clearly into view everywhere else: Doc Holliday in *Tombstone*, Miles in *Sideways*, every iteration of James Bond, and the entire cast of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. These just weren't witty rogues with minor problems—they were corroded alcoholics, constantly painting themselves into corners and never seeing themselves for who they really were.

One afternoon in early sobriety, I found myself rooting for Bruce Willis in some second-rate thriller called *16 Blocks*, strictly because his character was hungover throughout the whole thing and turned down a bottle of booze at a critical moment. I remember sitting there on my couch, actually wiping tears away. I was clearly starved to see something like me on the screen. No film or TV show gets alcoholism exactly right—the joyless drinking, the isolation, the dread and self-delusion—but maybe that's fitting, since drinking and recovery is so messy and imperfect to begin with. I'm just sensitive when alcoholism is some random trait some screenwriter assigns their character, or when booze

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Comment [LH1]: I think we are missing something here—you move from faking drunk in films bothers you to what you get out of pop culture that is positive—I'd love to hear you bash fake drunk more.

Comment [LH2]: Unclear what the "it" is here Sobriety? Addiction?

is less a defining characteristic than a prop, like when 007 broods over a bottle of Smirnoff.

I can't tell if it's insulting or ignorant (probably both) when actors flail around in a poor interpretation of being drunk. Sometimes, though, I find myself cringing at how accurate those cartoonish moments actually are. Every alcoholic has them. For the entirety of a film called *The Ice Harvest*, Oliver Platt's character gets progressively drunker and, at one point, he chucks a turkey leg at a window. It's a small moment, but it reminds me of a night spent drunkenly wandering Old Town Scottsdale, carrying around a box of cured olives from some upscale restaurant. For some reason, I decided to toss the olives into an outdoor concert crowd, then run. I don't remember eating at the restaurant, but I remember watching my olives rain down on a bunch of people.

I pull something out of every depiction of alcoholism and addiction, no matter how slight it is. Prior to getting sober, I had a few glimpses at what alcoholism looked like: Jeremy Renner calling Ben Affleck a "poor sober bastard" in *The Town*; Leo McGarry's lonely relapse in a hotel room on *The West Wing* after seasons of rock-solid sobriety; Vincent Chase spending 30 sun-dappled days in rehab on *Entourage*. I even remember watching *Crazy Heart*, having smuggled in two Great Lakes Christmas Ales into the theater in my trenchcoat. I had no idea Jeff Bridges's character was going to be an alcoholic, let alone acknowledging that I was, too. By the time Jeff Bridges's character loses a kid in a mall and flips his pick-up truck, the movie suddenly breezes through his time in rehab and he tells fellow alcoholic Robert Duvall that he thinks he's "licked it," like treatment was just something he had to get through. I remember clearly thinking: *Well, I guess if I ever go to rehab, it won't be so bad*. When I actually found myself in treatment a year later, I felt betrayed by that fucking movie. I was legitimately pissed off. I remember actually telling people in treatment, "This is *nothing* like *Crazy Heart*" and getting blank stares.

I need to see alcoholism on screen in the same way I need to *not* see it in real life. I'm drawn to portrayals of alcoholism and addiction—not the fork-in-the-electrical-socket surreality of *Requiem for a Dream* but something more like Mary Elizabeth Winstead's dazed, haunted performance in *Smashed* when she gets fired after revealing she's a recovering alcoholic and immediately goes to a bar, as if on autopilot. I like to see how screenplays unfold, to see if they're anything like mine. As an active alcoholic, I was just another actor—a loosely drawn caricature; a barely passable imitation of myself. I find truth in fiction in the same way I used to find comfort in lies. For me, there's genuine relief knowing that, just like a screenplay, my own story can be revised and rewritten for the better.

Comment [LH3]: Unclear here whether you were already acknowledging this, whether you had a moment of it during the movie, or whether this would happen later

Comment [LH4]: instead of "like mine" which could imply that they are like your screenplay, maybe "like my life"?

Comment [HLM5]: Great ending!