HOLLY[WINE] OR WINE IN THE AMERICAN CINEMA

Raphael Schirmer
Holly[wine] or Wine in the American Cinema

Abstract:

Eighty years after Prohibition, the United States of America has become the world's largest consumer of wine and the fourth largest producer. The role of the country is comparable at the world level to the role of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe: a hub within the wine-producing economy, with a leading role as taste-maker, with a remarkable effect of construction or transformation of the territories of wine. American cinema tends to reflect this new passion for the wine in the society. The whole point is to understand the discourse it holds, as well as the imaginary which it builds around this drink. Wine has become almost commonplace regarding its appearances on screen, not in what it means. In order to be more democratic, America seeks to get rid of old codes that rule all that surrounds wine.

Keywords: Consumption, Film, Globalization, United States of America, Vine, Vineyard, Wine

Introduction

“I am NOT drinking any fucking Merlot!”; these are the emphatic words pronounced by Miles’s character in the film Sideways. By that sentence, now famous, he contributed to spreading doubts about the organoleptic qualities of merlot grape variety as opposed to pinot noir. But, maybe more importantly, he opened the world’s eyes, and especially Europe’s, about the expertise some wine geeks can have in the United States (PICKET, 2004, p.8). The country is no longer regarded as one of savages (LUCAKS, 2000, p. IX), but as one of good wine and fine connoisseurs. A country believed to at last take to the pleasures of good food and of the wine culture. For the worldwide history of grapevine and wine can be seen as a cultural integration process that goes through civilisational and societal time and space (PITTE, 2009).

For American people, it was quite a long journey. Grapevine, Vitis vinifera, originally from Europe, was planted on the American territory as early as the XVIth century. However, due to
grapevine diseases the story of its expansion appears more as a fierce struggle. For the historian Thomas Pinney, “few things can have been done more eagerly tried and more thoroughly frustrated in American history than the enterprise of growing European varieties of grapes for the making of wine” (PINNEY, 1999, p. XV). Moreover, wine consumption long remained the privilege of an intellectual and economic elite …; consumption originated either from a francophile influence as in the case of President Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), or from an English influence as in the case of Madeira wine (HANKCOK, 2003). Only some communities such as Italo-Americans, who arrived later, regularly drank wine. That is why the United States ranked only sixth for worldwide wine consumption in the 1960s, far behind European countries.

Yet, only seventy-five years after Prohibition, the situation has dramatically evolved: the country is already believed to rank first for worldwide consumption with nearly thirty million hectolitres per year, and fourth for worldwide production with nearly twenty million hectolitres (OIV, 2007). The role of the United States on a worldwide scale can be compared to that of England on a European scale in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, i.e. the role of a hub for vine-wine economics, a leading country as regards tastes, with a remarkable effect on the building or the transformation of wine territories. With presently a slight difference, i.e. transport low costs and speed have so much contracted time and space that the scale has become global. The regions of Alto Douro (Portugal), Marsala (Sicilia) or Bordeaux now have twin wine-making regions in Barbaresco (Piedmont), Coonawarra (Australia) or of course in Napa Valley. The difference is that the world has become multi-polar, and other countries have a strong influence on the wine world.

US movies tend to reflect that new societal passion for wine, especially as many Hollywood leading figures are vineyard owners¹. The whole point consists in understanding its discourse about wine and the imaginary world it builds around it. Who are the wine-drinkers, where and when do they drink wine, where do their bottles come from…? What links with globalization can be grasped in that US media whose worldwide importance is well known…? What does it reflect of the way the country thinks about the topic of wine…? For that is indeed what the whole question is about…: the United States, and through them their movie industry, are attempting to promote a new approach to wine. What of the drinking codes that old Europe had set up…? What do they call the wines they drink…? How do they assess taste and quality…?

¹ There are many examples, but the most significant one is probably that of Francis Ford Coppola, who owns the Inglenook domain (Napa).
Here are many questions that a corpus of one hundred films\(^2\), from 1932 to this day (fig.1), encompassing nearly all genres – from epics to romance through independent movies, animated or science-fiction films to blockbusters –, should help delineate the borders of the “movies – American Society – wine” triptych. To tell all, that triptych is nearly all-present in recent films; it is less visible in older films, or in films from more conservative America, such as Clint Eastwood’s for instance. But in the other films, the presence of wine on-screen has become commonplace, although its meaning has not. Only a few films directly deal with the subject of wine or grapevine\(^3\), others have scenes that feature wine due to their particular interest for fine food (Julie and Julia or Ratatouille, for example), whereas most of them only feature wine upon a particular time of American life. A meal (Breakfast at Tiffany), a happy event or a celebration (The Great Gatsby), or a trip to New Orleans (Easy Rider). A funny caricature of the Last Supper even allows for wine to be seen in the film M*A*S*H. Any scene featuring wine – and more particularly sparkling wine\(^4\) – or vineyards was counted, and other spirits were counted too in order to draw comparisons. Sometimes only references in dialogues were selected, as in The Silence of the lambs, when Hannibal Lecter mentions his cannibalism (“I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti”). Only wine as defined by the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV,)\(^5\) was taken into account. This excludes a few drinks such as the poisoned “blackberry wine” in the film Arsenic and old Lace. By contrast, it appeared as essential to include brandies and the like, for these eau-de-vies are made from grape or wine musts and are

---

\(^2\) To build up the corpus, only films in which wine or vineyards are seen were selected. A major part of the references comes from the book by SANCHEZ SALAS, El Cine del Vino (2007). Others come from citations on websites, others again from films viewed by the author.

\(^3\) This Earth is Mine, A Walk in the Clouds, Sideways, Bottle Shock.

\(^4\) It is usually easy to recognize a bottle of Champagne, but localizing it is extremely hard, unless the producer’s name is mentioned. The United States are an important producer of sparkling wine.

\(^5\) “Basic definition (18/73): Wine is the beverage resulting exclusively from the partial or complete alcoholic fermentation of fresh grapes, whether crushed or not, or of grape must.”; http://www.oiv.int/oiv/info/endefinitionproduit?lang=en.
overwhelmingly present in certain films and in American culture.

I. The new American wine-consumer

![Graph showing wine consumption in the United States over time]

**Fig. n°2: References to wine in films and wine consumption in the United States**

As films were selected when wine was mentioned in the narrative, that variable is probably the least interesting one to study over time. Nevertheless, there appeared to be somewhat of a slump in the 1980s-1990s period, which corresponds to decreased consumption in the United States (fig.2). Could movies be so tightly correlated to consumption practices…? This is what can be foreseen as dessert wines are hardly ever featured any more, while white wines gain in importance over time.

Wine consumption as featured in American movies is a reflection of History, and consumption is indeed spreading.

1. Movies as a mirror of learning

It is probably possible to trace a prehistory of wine in US movies, but in very slight touches. First (unless we are mistaken and apart from a song in *Paint your wagon*), because western-type films do not integrate wine. In *High Noon*, consumption is based on whisky-type hard liquors, with the American bourbon variant. Then because it rests on a vision built up *a posteriori*, fed by
literature, as in the case of *East of Eden* (1955), inspired from the novel by John Steinbeck. In that film, whose scene takes place in 1917 in the Californian valley of Salinas, James Dean dips his finger into a glass of red wine while his mother drinks a dessert wine, maybe Madeira wine. Such is also the case of Edgar Allan Poe’s work, made into a film in 1962 with *Tales of Terror*. Wine is generally only glimpsed in a scene, as in *Casablanca*. Only *Fantasia* revisits mythological themes by drawing inspiration from Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony, the Pastoral. Alfred Hitchcock nevertheless places bottles of wine at the heart of the plot in the film *Notorious*.

Therefore we had to wait until the 1960s to see a first film, *This Earth is Mine*, take direct interest in grapevine and wine, furthermore during Prohibition, a special period in American history. During that period, which lasted from 1918 to 1933, spirit consumption was prohibited, except for medicinal reasons, as was allegedly the case for many wines. The film, which takes place in the legendary Ingelnook wine estate in California, features a family of owners confronted with the fact that it is impossible to sell wine, and the fraud set up by one of them. The discourse held by the film is based on making a hero out of adversity-faced American society, even if the law that is braved is indeed the law of the country. That period was of course dealt with in many films, such as *The Untouchables*, where hard liquors undoubtedly prevail. Prohibition is usually thought to have pushed Americans toward hard liquor consumption in order to reach drunkenness faster and at a lower cost. Yet, two references should be noted with *Some Like it Hot* in which vermouth and above all champagne are mentioned. We will come back to champagne again later. We know what an important role Marilyn Monroe played in linking that wine to elite, celebrations and sensuality, in true life as well as in movies.

The second period movies deal with in American history includes an event that was barely covered by the media at the time but has thoroughly turned into a myth since, *i.e.* the 1976 Judgement of Paris. Only one film, *Bottle Shock*, deals with the subject, but it fits into a ground-swell movement. To wit, a second film, *The Judgment of Paris*, should deal with the subject. And above all, the California State decreed, through the ACR 1536 bill in 2006, that it was a historic event of prime importance. The bottles tasted during the *Paris Tasting* are deposited at the Smithsonian’s Museum of History. It should be noted that the wine-tasting event, organized by the English critic Steven Spurrier, established the supremacy of Californian wines over French vintages. Of course, the film includes themes that were forged later…: the act of birth of quality American viticulture, the end of the supremacy of European wines, and to top it all, the victory of innovation and technology over conservatism and ancestral practises.

In the film, the owner of Château Montelena uses a refractometer (a device for measuring sugar contents in grapes) in order to determine the exact date for grape-harvest, while Europe is thought to be still deep into traditions that are closer to rough estimates. Even better : when the wine has quite a worrying color, the University of Davis (California) is called for help. Scientists shed light onto the question…: 

“You can make a wine too perfectly. This reductionist technique, excluding as much oxygen as possible from the process... after fermentation, is the best way to make chardonnay. (…) But there's a natural browning enzyme in white wine... an enzyme that's neutralized if it comes into contact with even a tiny bit of oxygen. (…) If no oxygen gets in... which is practically impossible, 

6 http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/05-06/bill/asm/ab_0151-0200/acr_153_cfa_20060531_112810_sen_floor.html.
a brown discoloration occurs in the bottle. But it's only temporary. Perils of perfection.”

Light and shade. New World wine-growers are driven by a deep belief in progress (SCHIRMER, 2006, p. 3). Could we consider it as a new Frontier...? A new myth for American society...? Anyhow, the process involves only a tiny minority of heroes who, in their cellars in California, set American history in motion, along with a few visionary critics or enlightened consumers. It is a success story that reminds us of the story of the computer industry or the communication worlds. Napa Valley is the wine equivalent of what Silicon Valley represents in the high technology field.

Wine consumption is now much more widespread. However, it appears in the form of an initiation, even though the East coast is slightly ahead, in movies at least, due to its strong intellectual closeness with Europe. The film Ghant plays on that duality through the encounter of two cultural universes: well-behaved life and candle-lit dinners served with wine go along with the Maryland family, whereas hard liquors and barbecues go along with Texans. This is also obvious in Woody Allen’s films, who, as early as Annie Hall or Manhattan, featured his characters mentioning wine, not humorlessly. Coming out of a restaurant, the character whose role is played by the film-maker cries out, “This is the first time I drank Chianti from Warsaw”. In these New-York intellectual environments, we can note that as early as 1977 Diane Keaton offered Woody Allen to go up to her place and have a glass of wine. Conversely, a cabaret dancer in The Killing of a Chinese Bookie, probably newly arrived in Los Angeles, finds out about champagne offered by Cosmo Vitelli but says she prefers vodka.

– Cosmo Vitelli: It's the best. (…) Dom Perignon.
– The dancer: Right. The best. I'll get used to it.
– Cosmo Vitelli: Should be.

Through these replies, we can perceive to what extent champagne is perceived as the symbol of social success, style, but also of “new rich” bad taste now and then. Scarface does not contradict:

– The waiter: Your champagne, Mr. Lopez.
– Mr Lopez: That is ’64?
– Le serveur: The best, Mr. Lopez.(…)
– Mr Lopez: $550 for this bottle, Tony. What do you think of that?
– Tony Montana: That's pretty good. For a bunch of fucking grapes.(…)
– Mr Lopez: How you like it, Tony?
– Tony Montana: That's good, Frank.(…) Like you say, man. That's good!
– Mr Lopez: I'm gonna get you new clothes, too. I'm gonna get you $550 suits... so you look real sharp. Cause I want you to work for me.

Jack’s character in the film Sideways is of course initiated about wine by his friend Miles, who teaches him how to recognize wine aromas and finely savor it. But later Jack is shocked when he realizes that Miles has a chewing-gum in his mouth.
This initiation is far from exclusive. For although red wine is uppermost, many other beverages are featured, including hard brown liquors of course (fig.3). It is not uncommon indeed to see each character with his/her own spirit within a same group (Network). Wine, and more particularly champagne, take up considerable space.

2. A wine democratization process?

The image conveyed by wine in movies is believed to relay a deep change in the imaginary world of American society: its elitist character tends to fade away, it seduces all generations, seems to transcend differences between men and women, and finally reaches the different communities. All these points should of course be put into perspective, and quite often into tight perspective.

Wine as presented in late XIXth- and early XXth-century movies was drunk by a wealthy elite. Whether riches were related to land (Giant), to the business world (The Great Gatsby) or to the industry (Gentlemen Prefer Blondes), wine and its derivatives were the drinks of high society. Beer and whisky were more for ordinary people. Everything is changing along with the XXIst century…: wine has become a drink rooted into the middle-class or upper middle-class. American movies feature barristers, journalists, businessmen/women, bankers, law people, who are not high-flight robbers (as in the Ocean's series), who all indulge in the pleasure of wine-tasting or of sharing a bottle among friends. We are dealing here with a favorite topic of wine fans and professionals in the United States…: wine should become accessible to large numbers of people. A large part of the success of wine prescriptors such as Robert Parker or Gary Vaynerchuk is linked to that theme. But two slight differences can be made about it. First, wine is very expensive in the United States, especially the best-known ones, and this of course slows down its progress through certain layers of society. Then, acquiring a solid knowledge about wine is not so easy for everybody.

That is why, among certain categories of people who are well-off intellectually as well as
socially, knowledge about wine can for example result in verbal fencing. Let us cite the following dialogue between the barrister played by George Clooney et Catherine Zetha-Jones, while the sommelier in a restaurant offers them wine in *Intolerable Cruelty*:

- George Clooney: *Red?*
- Catherine Zetha-Jones: *French?*
- GC: *Bordeaux?*
- CZJ: *Château Margaux?*
- GC: *'57?*
- CZJ: *'59.*
- GC: *'54.*
- CZJ: *mmm Mr. Massey...*

The scene that follows is not shown, so that unfortunately the bottle cannot be seen, but the intensity of the joust, between seduction and rivalry, testifies for the solid knowledge about wine some Americans have7 – or are thought to have. The mise en abyme of a country, then of a region, and finally of a vineyard and a given estate, and then the mise en abyme about the years that leads to the notion of vintage, strengthen the feeling of being in an insiders’ face-to-face meeting. Along the same trend of thought, Linus’s character in *Ocean’s Thirteen* exhibits perfect knowledge about château Yquem, saying that he is reluctant to drink 1973 wine, for it is a year in-between two vintage-less years and this could allow for doubts about its quality. How many viewers spotted the nuance…? Knowing about wine always confers a certain authority and power that Bourdieu already perceived in his time.

However, it is noteworthy that movies exhibit a deep-engraved tendency as regards the evolution of wine consumption in the United States…: the drink is now appreciated by all generations. It is not undergoing a gentrification process as in European countries where wine consumption is part of tradition. Consumption even tends to increase among young people, who are drawing the market upwards during the present crisis. That is why wine drinkers as featured by American movies can be baby-boomers (*Spanglish*), people belonging to the X generation – which represents most scenes – but also young people of the millennium generation.

That generation is probably one of the first, leaving alone elites, to have grown up in US families where wine was regularly served (*Friends with kids, The Parent Trap*). About that same subject, a scene in the film *Social Network* can draw our attention, as it is ever so representative of the imaginary world conveyed by that drink. In a bar, Mark Zuckerberg’s character meets again his former girl-friend (he had abusive words about her). She appears as having truly noble spirits while he passes as an immature boor. What are they drinking…? She is drinking wine, he is drinking beer. The contrast between the two drinks reinforces the behavioral gap between the characters in the viewer’s eyes…: one is civilized, the other appears as deprived of any kind of moral value.

Yet, let us note that this scene lays the emphasis on a difference between men and women that is not fully representative of wine consumption as it is featured in movies as a whole. The

---

7 With the slight difference that the 1954 wine is rated as “*mediocre*” by the Château itself… 1959 would have been a much better choice! ([http://www.chateau-margaux.com/Website/dynamic/millesimes.php?LANGUAGE=fra&blocmin=1945&blocmax=1977](http://www.chateau-margaux.com/Website/dynamic/millesimes.php?LANGUAGE=fra&blocmin=1945&blocmax=1977))
numbers of men (59% of the scenes) and women (44%) filmed with a glass of wine are roughly the same. This probably results from the fact that many scenes feature couples, or friends around a table. Nevertheless, movies mirror American facts, while distorting them through the over-representation of men on the screen…: wine consumption is slightly more of a feminine habit. It is estimated to be fifty-three percent of women (GIACINTI, 2004, p. 59), which of course is not a very significant difference. But it is now possible to see women open a bottle of wine (Friends with kids) – a gesture strongly perceived as manly, with the thorough phallic connotation that is included in the cork extraction gesture –, choose wine (Sideways), have solid knowledge about it (Year of the Comet⁸), or make a living out of it (in the same film, or in Sideways again, which is highly progressive about the subject), lead a wine-tasting session along with professionals in a restaurant (No Reservations). Differences between men and women are getting thinner, so that it is no longer surprising to see two female friends order wine at the restaurant.

Yet, if we take a close look, consumption is gender-dependent…: women drink white wine, very often chardonnay. In most of the scenes where a woman is seen with a glass of wine, it is white wine. White wine is perceived as not so rich – American red wines have a high alcohol content, around 14-15° if not more, with an increase these last decades (ALSTONA, et al., 2011, p. 136) –, and as going well with balanced meals. Health is a particularly important issue for understanding the interest of American people, and probably even more of American women, for wine. Since the CBS News programme in 1991 about the famous “French paradox”, the advantages of reasonable consumption have been largely known to the public and have encouraged moderate consumption. Young American women are all the more sensitive to that question as it is classical in the American press to put forward French women’s look, all of them slim, healthy, and sexy⁹.

Movies probably amplify the process by encouraging women to drink white wine. How many of them were influenced by Sarah Jessica Parker in Sex and the City (by the film, but even more by the TV series)? By Julia Roberts in Ocean's Eleven? Or by Pam Grier in Jackie Brown…? England is believed to have undergone a similar process with the Bridget Jones-chardonnay matching in the book and the film…: an influential British critic, Oz Clarke, evoked a “Bridget Jones effect” to account for the drop in chardonnay sales in 2008¹⁰. The wine was getting negatively connoted. The question of the media’s impact on consumption is hard, if not impossible to answer…; but the film Scarface indeed appears to be at the origin of a similar process. Cognac consumption has become very important in the Afro-American community in the past few years. The song “Pass The Courvoisier” is famous¹¹, and a rapper bears the character’s name…; the film is indeed a cult reference among the community. Yet, the character played by Al Pacino nearly surely drinks cognac at the end of the film. It is a safe bet that the work contributed to promoting, if not even initiating, that liking of Afro-Americans for the liquor from Charentes. It is only a hypothesis, but it appears as strongly plausible and deserves to be investigated. The films that narrate the life of famous American rappers, 8 Miles and Get Rich or Die Tryin’, cannot indeed do without scenes that feature brandy. The pronounced taste for that

⁸ To be precise, this is about a young woman of English origin, from a family of wine-traders. But she has to fight against prejudices.
⁹ As an example, see the book by Debra Ollivier, What French Women Know (2009).
¹¹ Busta Rhymes, P.Diddy et Pharell Williams.
liquor can be explained, among others, by the desire of the Afro-American community to stand aside from the consuming codes of WASPs. The film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* did attempt in its own time to gather everybody around a bottle of wine…

Such consumption differences mostly arise from the very way wine is used in movies. When a bottle is seen on-screen, it is quite frequently a part of the settings that reinforces or even connotes a place on-screen. Wine can even play the role of a catalyst in film narratives, up to becoming practically a forerunner of the actors’ performance.

3. An artefact of privacy and otherness

![Map of the United States showing consumption of wine](image)

*Fig. n°4: The Consumption of wine in American territory*

Consumption is by and large uppermost in urban areas. Unlike in European movies; or then only in scenes that re-create Europe, no farmers are seen drinking wine, and there are no bars either. The grandfather in *The Grapes of Wrath* dreams of taking a bath of grape juice once in California, but he does not mention wine…. it is not sure either whether he knows about wine. And although wine is consumed by local folk in *The Godfather I* or in *The Secret of Santa Vittoria*, it is in order to better feature rural Italy.

Wine is a city-dweller’s drink. It is drunk in large American cities, and we know that they are over-represented in American movies…: above all New York and Los Angeles, but also Las Vegas or Miami for our matter. Movies do indeed reflect true facts of the present American world (fig.4).

Private and public spaces in cities are therefore drinking places. Homes are first, with 33.9% of the scenes. In certain films, the downtown flats of young upper-class people in their thirties are seen (Friends with kids), or the American suburb houses of established people in their forties (American Beauty). Wine consumption preferentially takes place in the kitchen – especially when a given character is getting the meal ready for his/her guest, it is not uncommon for him/her to sip a glass of wine (Sex and the City) –, even more in the sitting-room, or even in the bedroom for intimate scenes. When a bottle of wine appears on screen, it turns into a kind of foreboding sign of a sensual or erotic scene; we could easily calculate the average time lapse that separates wine consumption from the next scene to foresee the successive scenes. Forty seconds in the film Bottle Shock, about ten in Face Off – with some violence in that case –, five in Julie and Julia. The scenes are always very prudish, except in Pretty Woman where Julia Roberts practises oral sex to Richard Gere. Wine, which is then almost exclusively red, except in Top Gun or Ocean’s Thirteen, turns into a cliché of seduction. Waking up in the morning with a bottle of champagne next to the bed allows the viewer to understand at once what happened between two adults during the night (Forgetting Sarah Marshall).

The scenes with wine in them are quite frequently accompanied by music, which reinforces intimacy. Pieces are always easily recognizable when it comes to classical music: the Four Seasons by Vivaldi (Pretty Woman), La Traviata by Verdi (No Reservations), Madame Butterfly by Bellini (Bottle Shock). It can confer the scene a warm atmosphere, with jazz (Sex and the City), Franck Sinatra (Bewitched), or folk music (Sideways). Some characters even lose their temper when faced with the blandness of the atmosphere…: in American Beauty, the daughter in teenage angst asks her mother if she really needs to listen to that “elevator music” during meals, while her husband later exclaims, “I'm really tired of that Lawrence Welk shit”.

As for the restaurant (24.6% of the scenes), it is of course a choice place for wine consumption. There is of course no scene in an Italian or a French restaurant that is not marked by the presence of a bottle from the country…, it even turns into a clue for understanding what kind of restaurant it is, or else reinforces the identity of the place in the viewer’s eyes, like a cultural token. A bottle of bordeaux here (The French Connection), another from Tuscany at an Italian restaurant (Big Night). It all partakes of a stereotype : a brief stay in Russia is of course highlighted by the consumption of vodka (The Saint), in Cuba by rum and cigars (The Godfather II), in Japan by sake (Lost in translation). It may be an impediment for certain countries not to have their wine on screen because too few restaurants are located in the United States. We can think of Spain, of course, which is yet quite present in London, but is only just starting to settle in North America. As a result, most films show foreign restaurants that are French or Italian, with the consequent over-representation of their wines.

A few night-club scenes show wine consumption, most often champagne (Scarface). A few other urban life places can be seen, but they are less representative…: the office (Disclosure or Network), the car, often a big limousine (The Killing of a Chinese Bookie). There does not appear to be any scene in a wine-bar per se. The aeroplane, a symbol of mobility-driven modernity, is also a place where wine-tasting takes place, especially of champagne (In the Air, or even Madagascar 2). That is why wine-tasting scenes that take place in hotels are frequent (6.4%...
So far, we can see that there is nothing new or surprising as far as wine consumption is concerned, apart from the appeal of cognac for the Afro-American community. These city-dwellers drink wine in town. When they get away from the town, it is to better master it, with Los Angeles shot in tilt-up at night (Bewitched). It is a standard among American movies. Or else the characters enjoy the scenery (“we’re gonna (...) enjoy the scenery”) and have a picnic, as in Sideways. Of course, it is an old practise, let us think of Monet’s Déjeuner sur l’Herbe (1865), but all the same it testifies of a certain distance from drinking codes. It is also part of a very powerful theme which consists in renewing the approach to wine.

II. A new discourse about wine

“How would you rate this one, Miles?”. Through this question timidly asked by the novice Jack to his friend Miles (Sideways) – who by the way does not answer him word for word, as a fine connoisseur – is in fact hidden a whole change of paradigm: wine can be drunk for itself. It does not automatically go with a meal, and can provide pleasure per se. Such pleasure has to be quantified by critics…: US media offer a rating scale out of 100 points that relies on a bunch of criteria. They are measurable. They are objective. Or at least they are thought so… The first approach to wine can be done using vintage wines with characteristics that are easily identifiable by consumers, even if they still have knowledge gaps. America is trying to get rid of the codes that frame the wine world.

1. Grape variety wines

One of the major characteristics of the American approach to wine is through grape variety, not through production region as in Europe. Many films feature characters who name wines by their grape variety. One can find chardonnay (American Psycho), cabernet-sauvignon (Miss Congeniality), zinfandel (Bottle Shock) – a variety that is now part of California’s identity (SULLIVAN, 2003, p. 51) – and of course pinot noir, made famous for many consumers by the film Sideways. What the press called “the Sideways effect” should be tampered…; it was demonstrated that far from triggering enthusiasm for that variety as was asserted, the film rather fit into an on-going trend (CUELLAR & al., 2008).

In any case, we cannot but note the primacy given to grape variety. Several hypotheses can be mentioned to account for that point…: an approach to viticulture by settlers who met enormous difficulties trying to grow vines and tested many varieties, a key-role of German settlers, or the will to stand apart from Europe. It is for example what the influential wine importer and critic Franck Schoonmaker (1905-1976) recommended in the first half of the XXth century. For him, variety had to be put forward (SCHOONMAKER, MARVEL, 1940). Another interpretation can be proposed, in which the original region is considered as a kind of doomed archaism. In her book How Institutions Think, Marie Douglas compares wine production to linen making. As
linen making got industrialized, it broke free from “Ancien Regime” institutions\textsuperscript{13}: therefore fabrics lost their spatial names to the benefit of an industrial classification that laid the stress on production. The process is believed to be the same for wine, thought to lose its spatial roots to the benefit of grape variety (DOUGLAS, 1986, p. 150). Besides, American people use the word industry about wine, and yields are calculated in tons per hectare, like a raw material. The winemaker, quite visible in Bottle Shock, is at the heart of the vine-wine process. He buys grapes from the grape-growers (Sideways) to make wine out of them. Far from being thoroughly satisfactory, this last explanation nevertheless highlights American people’s will to renew and modernize the wine world.

\textit{In fine}, this allows consumers to move around easily across quite a complex wine universe, by spotting easily such and such aromas related to a given variety while putting their trust in a brand name. Several of them can be seen in American films…; Villa Antinori (Big Night), Clos du Val (Forgetting Sarah Marshall), or Pahlmeyer (Disclosure). The latter is representative of a tendency of American producers at the end of the XXth century to produce very powerful, woody, highly aromatic\textsuperscript{14} wines, with buttery or milky tastes in mouth due to the use of malolactic fermentation. Typically the kind of wine that Miles’s character in Sideways cannot stand.

\begin{itemize}
\item Jack : \textit{I thought you hated chardonnay.}
\item Miles : \textit{No, no, no. I like all varietals. I just don't generally like the way they manipulate chardonnay in California. Too much oak and secondary malolactic fermentation.}
\end{itemize}

This character’s pronounced taste for pinot noir comes from the fine tastes he finds in it, with wines that have been little or not at all tampered with. In the United States, enlightened amateurs tend toward as little tampering as possible. “Terroirs”, considered in quite a reductive manner\textsuperscript{15}, are trendy. In the scene that follows the one just cited, Miles passionately explains the privileged role of climate on Californian pinot.

\textit{“You see, the reason that this region is so good for pinot... is that the cold air off the Pacific flows in at night... and it just cools down the berries. Pinot's a very thin-skinned grape. It doesn't like constant heat or humidity. Very delicate.”}

We can sense here to what extent the character is fed by American science which, since the

\textsuperscript{13} “Fabric making has broken free from Old regime institutions. It now no longer meets the dressing tastes of a stratified society, or the rules and privileges of a corps of urban weavers and merchants, or the habits of the farmers who work out in the country, or the processes imposed/required by the government of Versailles”, p.150


\textsuperscript{15} « Terroir » is often understood by American people as the sole influence of climate and soil on the organoleptic qualities of wines. The INAO defines “terroirs” as follows: “A “terroir” is a delimited geographical space within which a human community builds up, in the course of its history, a common production know-how that is based on interactions between a biological and physical environment and a set of human factors. The resulting socio-technical trajectories reveal a specific originality, confer a specificity and lead to a reputation for an item originating from that geographical space.”
works of Amerine and Winkler in the 1940s, has divided up space into climatic regions according to parameters mainly linked to temperature (AMERINE, WINKLER, 1944). Viticulture was first mostly centered in the central Californian valley, considered as hot climate, but now quality wines are more and more produced in cool climate conditions. Especially pinot noir, preferably planted at the foot of mountains or near the sea. Hence the importance of Santa Barbara Valley in the film, considered as cool due to its closeness to the sea and its tormented topography. Hence too the importance of climate in the current approach to viticulture (SCHIRMER, 2011, p. 106).

Such geography of vine and wine, marked by a trend toward quality improvement across space, is also perceived at other scales through changes as regards wine choices.

2. The wines that are drunk: a reflection of globalization

Old films overwhelmingly favor European wines, especially from well-established regions, but more recent films lay more the stress on wine regions born along with globalization (fig. 5).

Two French wine-making regions are clearly dominant in American movies: the Champagne region (23.5% of wine quotes are about champagne-like wines) and the Bordeaux region (3.2%)\(^\text{16}\). Champagne is systematically drunk at parties (Gatsby), celebrations (Catch Me If You Can), for Thanksgiving (Giant), for Christmas or the New Year (The Godfather II), or again for a happy event, whether a wedding (In the Air) or a birth (Friends with kids). Bordeaux is more the regular wine at the restaurant (The Saint). It is presented in its whole range of colors, while playing it safe through the use of a few “appellations” (local names), always the best-renowned…: Médoc especially (seven references, and the remarkable possibility to mention names down to local village names such as Margaux), sometimes Sauternes, once only Pomerol or Pessac-Léognan (with Haut-Brion of course), more rarely elsewhere. Paradoxically, while there is marked enthusiasm for Saint-Emilion wines in the United States, only Sideways and Bottle Shock mention them with château Cheval Blanc 1961 and 1947. And it is even more out of the question to find wines of a more confidential origin, or less famous ones.

Italy (2.5%) is also well represented in American movies, especially as far as Chianti is concerned. This is due to the presence of Italian communities in the United States, filmed in numerous films about the mafia, as well as to gastronomy (Big Night). There is a true “Love affair”\(^\text{17}\) between American people and these wines. Italy is indeed the first importing country as far as volumes are concerned, while France remains in the first place in terms of cash-value. The other European regions are far less visible, and some of them even tend to be erased. They are featured in films that set on screen literary works of the XIXth century or old works: such is the case of sherries (Gentlemen Prefer Blondes). Paradoxically enough, such an important wine region as Burgundy is less represented in movies (The Parent Trap, Tales of Terror, Notorious, Julie and Julia, and finally Sideways). Maybe its international success is too new for it to be set up on screen across the Atlantic…? Maybe too the shape of the bottle is not evocative enough for the American public, historically much more used to the bordeaux shape\(^\text{18}\)?

---

\(^{16}\) The figure should be higher, but many bottles cannot be localized for good, apart from their being from the Bordeaux region.

\(^{17}\) Decanter magazine, 15th April, 2011.

\(^{18}\) See the book by Jean-Robert Pitte about the subject, Bordeaux-Burgundy: A vintage Rivalry (2008).
noir should undoubtedly favor an evolution from that viewpoint in the coming years. For there does exist a dynamics among the wines that are featured...; new regions are shown in movies, the United States being so much part of wine globalization places.

Indeed, American movies are opening onto new horizons...: wines from regions in Europe that had been little known so far are featured, as are wines from the New World. With Californian wines to start with (3.2% of wines). Leaving alone the films that take place in vineyards themselves, the first film the deliberate featuring of an American wine can be attributed to is *Jaws*. But the scene is aimed at being funny: it is quite hard for the host to open the bottle for he is more used to drinking hard liquors, and the character who brought the wine – a university lecturer, that sets it all! – appears as a mannerless greedy pig. Showing American bottles should probably be interpreted as a stroke of humour from Steven Spielberg, as the sign of some sort of cupidity at the time. The tone is quite different in *Top Gun* in 1986, the second film featuring a Californian wine19.

---

19 To be precise, a wine from the Livermore Valley is shown in the film *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* in 1976, but it is within the field of the movie-camera, whereas the scene is shot in a restaurant.
Fig. n°5: Vineyards and wine in American cinema
Could the film, which glorifies the American Army, have reasonably featured a European vintage…? In any case, it testifies for the new viewpoint American people have had about their own wine industry since the Judgement of Paris. The number of films in which Californian wines can be found keeps increasing. Yet, only Napa Valley really catches the attention. The wines from other highly trendy American regions, like those from Washington State or the Fingers Lakes (not far from New-York) are still waiting for a film director.

Let us note that two films (No Reservations and Sex and the City 2), refer to Australian vineyards, and we know what an impetus they got from the United States. Even better, they were shaped, whether concerning the way bottles are presented or wine taste, to seduce the young American public. By using vivid colors such as yellow, by displaying a logo that is an animal (a wallaby for that matter), modern typo, and finally a simple but quite concentrated taste, the brand [Yellow Tail] has known the biggest sales progress of the American market to reach thirteen million 9-litre wine boxes, namely 156 million bottles a year. That is why the title of this article is written using square brackets, as a reference to that brand which was like a true asteroid in the American trading sky. The novel typo echoes the passions of the young wine-drinking generations in the United States, thanks to their appetite for new communication technologies.

The influence of American consumption is spreading over to Europe, with Italy to begin with. The presence of less well-known regions than Tuscany proceeds from their insertion into globalization. Such is particularly the case of the Barbaresco region (cited in the film Sleepers), still unknown not long ago, but now dynamized by the American market. We can more particularly thank the wine producer Angelo Gaja for seducing the country’s public and for having drawn the attention of the press to that Piedmont region. The use of modern wine-making techniques, of so-called international grape varieties, and powerful organoleptic qualities are the assets of worldwide recognition. Thus other wine-making areas are now featured in movies, such as la Rioja (Friends with kids) and of course the “Super Tuscans” with notably the mythic Sassicaia (Sideways and Pink Panther 2) (SCHIRMER, 2010). But globally, we can notice that widespread eclecticism is not yet the rule. No wine from Central Europe, Latin America or South Africa for the time being.

Paradoxically, movies appear to be lagging behind American consumption, which is deeply marked by the desire to find out about wines from all over the world. American people are driven by the feeling of living a particular period of vine-wine globalization. A kind of Golden Age (TABER, 2011, p. 1) marked by quality wines from the most unexpected places on earth (VESETH, 2001, p. 92), at fully affordable prices for the middle classes (COLMAN, 2008, p. 106). Globalization acts in favor of consumers (GOKCEKUSA, FARGNOLIA, 2007, p. 194).

All these features partake in the powerful move toward the integration of wine into American culture.

3. Old and new tasting codes

It is a favorite theme in US movies to make a joke of the codes that surround wine. In the way the glass is held, which is pompous in Some Like it Hot to mimick a billionaire, in the choice of glasses – in Blues Brothers, Elwood holds out his water glass to drink champagne (“wrong glass Sir”, the waiter retorts) – , or again in the habit of sniffing the cork to check wine quality –
although it is a metal capsule (a screw cap) – that the waiter asks Kermit the frog to sniff in the film *Muppet Show*. This shows American people’s desire to renew wine consumption by cleaning it up of all the codes that render it inaccessible to philistines. This also highlights changes in the consumers’ profiles mentioned above: while a young lady is taught about wine by her aunt in order to get into the Parisian high society of the early XXth century (*Gigi*) along with all that a young lady from that world is expected to know before finding a husband, wine takes on new connotations in XXIst century America.

Wine-drinking is turning into a source of pleasure, a sensual act, or even a means of perfecting one’s senses for the middle or upper classes. It is a source of pleasure when wine obeys dish-wine agreements more and more often, with sweet white wine (“liquoreux”) to go with foie gras, for example (*No Reservations*). Sometimes strange associations between dishes and wines are seen, such as sardines and red wine (*Bottle Shock*), steak and white wine (*No Reservations*), and of course fast food dishes to go with a Cheval Blanc 1961 (*Sideways*). It is a sensual act, or even a means to perfect one’s senses, when wine is finely analysed following the rules of modern oenology. What is evoked is no longer the feelings relying on the taster’s personal memories, but quasi-scientific aroma analysis.

“*Mmm. A little citrus. Maybe some strawberry. Mmm. Passion fruit. Mmm. And-- Ah, there’s just, like, the faintest... soupon of like, uh, asparagus and--There's a--just a flutter of, like, a--like, a nutty Edam cheese.*”

Nothing surprising then when we see George Clooney meticulously sniffing his wine (*The American*). Wine can now be drunk for itself, before dinner, among friends (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*) or alone (*Friends with kids*). Wine-tasting scenes are proposed (*Midnight in Paris*).

**Conclusion**

When entering Napa Valley, one can see a board (filmed in *Bottle Shock* amongst others) which associates wine to bottled poetry. It is a reference to a text by Stevenson:

“*Wine in California is still in the experimental stage; and when you taste a vintage, grave economical questions are involved. The beginning of vine-planting is like the beginning of mining for the precious metals: the wine-grower also “Prospects.” One corner of land after another is tried with one kind of grape after another. This is a failure; that is better; a third best. So, bit by bit, they grope about for their Clos Vougeot and Lafite. Those lodes and pockets of earth, more precious than the precious ores, that yield inimitable fragrance and soft fire; those virtuous Bonanzas, where the soil has sublimated under sun and stars to something finer, and the wine is bottled poetry: these still lie undiscovered (...) But there they bide their hour, awaiting their Columbus; and nature nurses and prepares them. The smack of Californian earth shall linger on the palate of your grandson.*”

It shows well the self-confidence American producers are endowed with. To their eyes, getting equal with the best French or European wines was only a matter of time. They succeeded in 1976 with the Judgement of Paris. As far as outdoing French or European wines and proposing a new model for wine is concerned, it is all happening under our own eyes, under the influence of the American media. It is hard to tell between the respective roles of the written press, whether specialized or general, the blogosphere, and of course movies. But the discourse they hold about vine and wine is spreading to the rest of the world. American movies do indeed appear as a soft power. For example, if we stick to the question of the approach to wines via varieties at the expense of production regions, the phenomenon is inexorably spreading. Of course the other New World wine regions are following in these steps, sometimes turning their back on their former traditions (SCHIRMER, 2008, p. 200). Europe itself allowed for grape varieties to be mentioned for local wines in 2008, and in 2012 for Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP) wines. Finally, in the United Kingdom, whether in pubs, restaurants or supermarkets, more and more wines are classified according to variety. The same goes for the rating out of 100 in the American model initiated by Robert Parker and taken over by the magazine Wine Spectator. The English magazine Decanter, the keeper of the flame, after long criticizing this approach, introduced it in their July 2012 issue. The former order established by Europeans in terms of vine and wine is staggering. This is indeed what Steven Spurrier’s character notes at the end of the film Bottle Shock:

“We have shattered the myth... of the invincible French vine. And... not just in California. We've opened the eyes of the world. (...) We'll be drinking wines from... well, South America. Australia. New Zealand. Africa. India. China. This is not the end, Maurice. This is just the beginning. Welcome to the future.”

What American movies convey is nothing but a revisited image of wine. It has turned into a drink with a highly positive connotation – there is nothing new here of course, let us think of the English James Bond films – it offers youth and health to people who drink it, it offers the possibility to shine in society, it allows hurried urban dwellers to meet between friends, or to benefit from the advantages of a positively perceived globalization. Wine has become “glamor”20. Wine professionals, who rely on widely distributed films to advertise21, have understood it all.

For the time being that discourse about wine appears quite similar to what can be viewed of the Asian movies that take interest in wine, whether they are Japanese films (Tampopo), Chinese films from Hong-Kong (Breaking News) or Korean (The Housemaid). The discourse seems to be almost becoming universal, in any case in the countries where spirits are allowed.

Bibliography:

20 The word is from the critic Jancis Robinson (in her article in the Financial Times, “Bordeaux, Burgundy... Yongning?”, 13th October, 2007; http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0f1ae496-7864-11dc-8e4c-00007779f4d2ac.html#axzz264HJC4uX.
21 The film Sex and the City 2 was accompanied by an advertising campaign carried out by a trader in sparkling wine whose bottles are shown in the film. Conversely, Walt Disney studios had to stop selling a French wine when the film Ratatouille came out, notably because American wine producers protested vehemently against the presence of that wine in Disneyland...!


HANCOCK, D., 2003, Madeira wine: the rise of a trans-imperial market economy


SCHOONMAKER, F., MARVEL, T., 1940, American Wines, Duel, Sloan and Pierce.


STEVENSON, R.S., 1879, La Route de Silverado, Phébus – Libretto, éd. 2000.


Filmography: