

## The Emotions of Prohibition

Communication is one of the most important things in life. It would be increasingly difficult to know what was happening without it. However, when one says “communication,” speaking or singing comes to mind first because they are what we can physically hear. But all communication is not verbal; sometimes the most powerful and moving communication can be through actions or movements. The power of sight can be even more influential than the ear or mind because words are often deceptive and paradoxical, but sight seems to be objective and real. Tell a person to touch his cheek while pointing to your chin, and most people will point to their chin. Because of this, one cannot underestimate the power of silent films which were very popular in the early-twentieth century. These movies were excellent ways of conveying important messages and getting a response out of people. The producers of these inspiring films made a significant impact on the entertainment industry, but also on the moral dilemma of alcohol. Without the ingenuity of these silent film producers in using simple body movements and emotional cues to convey the great danger of alcohol, people would not have truly understood the perils of alcohol or the life-altering changes that followed, because they could not physically see them.<sup>1</sup>

People are unknowingly trained at a young age to notice emotions. Whether these emotions are happiness, sadness, or anger, it is important to be able to read them properly so one can act accordingly. For example, if someone is furious about how they were treated at work that day it would be wise not to tell them that another employee received a raise that same day. This all plays a very important role in another aspect of nonverbal communication which is

mentality. Alice Guy-Blache' directed a spectacular silent film in 1899 about alcoholism.<sup>1</sup> This film, however, was about a certain drink which did not have a strong moral reputation. Absinthe, which also went by the name of Green Fairy, was a very strong, green drink. Absinthe was a special kind of alcohol that was said to cause visions and moments of extreme madness. Guy-Blache's film depicts an ordinary man, named Clarence, who is going to a restaurant to relax and order a drink. He orders a glass of absinthe right away and is quickly presented with his drink. Clarence, however, does not glance up from his reading long enough to prepare the drink properly before drinking it. "When someone ordered absinthe in the nineteenth century, they were provided with a dose of the alcohol in a large glass with sugar and a carafe of water to dilute it to their taste.<sup>2</sup> After only one sip of the disgustingly strong beverage, Clarence begins to publicly attack Alfred, the waiter. Alfred reacts immediately trying to defend himself by grabbing the first thing in his sight which is a water bottle. Once Clarence manages to make his escape from the flow of freezing liquid, the film comes to a halting close. <sup>1</sup> While this film was not made for the primary purpose of supporting the Prohibition movement, it still shows the dangers of the drink. It depicts a usually calm and serene man who quickly turns hysterical, all because his drink was not to his liking.

Sights indicating emotional states form quick and lasting impressions of individuals. Moreover the eye is quick at discerning a person's emotional state. If the person is at a social event with many people one can glean quite rapidly whether they are comfortable in society or not. This can all be noticed by simple things such as their posture, if they are hunched over with their eyes directed at the floor or if they mess with their hands continuously one can determine that they are uncomfortable. Body language is also an excellent way to share a message or to communicate a story. One fantastic example of this would be a silent picture by Ferdinand

Zecca, a French filmmaker who was well known for his silent film supporting prohibition.<sup>3</sup>

*Alcohol and Its Victims*, made in 1902, was one of his best productions. Zecca sets the scene with a joyful family, which consists of Lucille, her young daughter, Jane, the Grandmother, Irene, and the prosperous father, Fredrick. In mere seconds, one can deduce that this is a compatible family. Their body language is all extremely open and carefree. Once Mr. Byers walks through the door, the entire family runs to greet him and give him a hug. However, their happiness does not last forever. One day when Mr. Byers is returning home from work, he stumbles upon some old friends. They want to reminisce, so they persuade him to join them for just one drink. After many hours of being at the saloon, Mr. Byers becomes drunk and gambles his money away. This day was only the start of his prosperous family's downfall. His saloon activities become a regular occurrence. The next scene shows how the father's actions have ruined this once happy family. The body language of the Byers family has completely changed from happy and open to miserable and closed off. Their once lavish home which contained many nice and beautiful items was now gone. The beautiful chandelier, the glorious dishes, and the large window with the wonderful view were all gone. All these possessions had to be sold to compensate for the father's addiction.<sup>4</sup> This silent film filled the eye with excellent propaganda. It displayed with simple body language just how quickly joy can be lost because of an addiction to drink.

In 1909, D. W. Griffith made another film with a remarkable emotional visibility called “*A Drunkard's Reformation*.”<sup>5</sup> This film portrayed an average family with a husband named Albert Hills. Unfortunately, Hills was a drunkard and loved whiskey more than his own wife, Beatrice, and daughter, Caroline. The film progresses to show how unhappy the Hill family becomes. Faces fail to meet, hands clench in desperation, and tears flow. Soon his attitude causes him to skip family meals in favor of staying at the local saloon, drinking with a friend.

One day, daughter Caroline begs Albert to take her to see the play that is in town. While watching this play, he is absolutely horrified. The protagonist in the play seems to follow the very plot of Albert's recent life. He begins to feel remorse. He realizes that he has been destroying not only his own life, but that of Beatrice and Caroline, one drink at a time. He rushes home with his daughter in tow to see Beatrice and to apologize for his mistakes. Mr. Hill assures her that from now on he would be a better husband and father.<sup>6</sup> While this film has absolutely no words or noise, its emotional content is pressure packed. Abject misery gives way to elation.

It is notable that one of the first great masters of film as a medium, D.W. Griffith, was also a prohibitionist with discerning new insights about the portrayal of emotion. Previous producers of the silent-film genre naturally embraced the smile as a way to show happiness and contentment. The smile, however, is a little harder to read than expressive eyes. Some become so used to faking a smile that others suspect the expression. If a character smiles with a closed mouth, for example, chances are he is either faking his smile or becoming uncomfortable. What Griffith understood was that true smiles desperately need the eyes. The smile must reach the eyes for it to be considered real. D. W. Griffith, in *What Drink Did*, used beautiful smiles in the initial phase of the film to heighten dramatic tension.<sup>7</sup> This story begins with a picture-perfect family which includes the wife, husband, and their two daughters. It is easy to see through their expressive eyes and excited smiles that this family is genuinely happy. To add to the mirth they are all enjoying a nice, family tea party. Then the father, Patrick Bingley, leaves for work not knowing that he is about to make a fatal mistake.

In good spirits, Mr. Bingley is offered a glass of whiskey on his lunch break and he accepts it. Not seeing the harm in going to the local saloon after work to have a few more drinks, he joins his friends for a while. His family notices his absence and when he does finally arrive home, he is

drunk. Now we are struck by the dramatic change in the eye expression of Mary, and daughter, Emma. Their once beautiful, charged eyes, now droop with sorrow and shame. Mr. Bingley's nightly outings then continue until one fateful night. The oldest daughter, Amelia, is sent on a mission to find her father and bring him home. After searching many places and asking as many people, she finally finds him at the saloon. Amelia is immediately sent home by her father. But then she encounters a mother with tears streaming from her eyes. She returns to the saloon. Once Mr. Bingley sees her enter again, he tries to shove her away in anger, but the bartender, Wesley Martin, does not appreciate the violence in his saloon. Mr. Martin tries to shove Bingley and then after not getting the results that he wanted, he pulls out a daunting pistol. In the struggle, Amelia was caught in the mix and is tragically shot in the eye ending her life. Mr. Bingley is immediately devastated. His eyes almost seem to roll out of their sockets in grief. He is then filled with rage and starts attacking his friends with hatred in his eyes. Once he finally calms down a little, he leaves the saloon with a sullen expression proclaiming that he will never return. Mr. Bingley returns home to relay the terrible news of their sweet Amelia's demise.<sup>8</sup> This horrible event opens the fathers' eyes. How foolish his actions had been and how dire the consequences of his need for drink! He peers into the eyes of his wife and only remaining daughter, courageously, searching for a hint of forgiveness, consolation, or renewal.

The film-makers of prohibition thus found a way to accent emotional propaganda with the eyes. They also used space to convey or increase emotional feelings. When observing other people's conversations, it is easy to tell if they are close talkers or if they prefer to keep some space between them. Close talking makes many people uncomfortable. This leaves no room for personal space or a way to quickly escape an uncomfortable situation. There is an excellent example of spacing in the silent film titled "*Ten Nights in a Bar Room*" produced by William A. O'Connor.<sup>9</sup>

This film begins in the Moosehead Saloon, which is one of the only saloons in this small town. Charlie Butcher, the owner of the saloon, and Joe Morgan, the local drunkard begin the film, arguing. Charlie is reluctant to serve Joe another drink because he knows that he needs to get home to his wife, Claudia, and his daughter, Louisa. Joe refuses to leave and demands another glass of rum. Charlie, however, is still trying to persuade him to head home when Joe decides that he has had enough of Charlie's pestering. Joe lunges at the owner of the saloon with hatred in his eyes. He fixates on the man he will hit. He thus misses the sight of his daughter in the corner of the saloon. As the fight escalates, Charlie grabs the glass off the table and throws it at Joe's head. Joe can duck out of the way, but Louisa is not so lucky. When her back is turned to the violence before her, she is struck with the glass immediately, rendering her unconscious. Joe rushes to his daughter. When he sees the damage done to Louisa, he turns to threaten Charlie's life.<sup>10</sup> The use of personal space was used quite cleverly in this story. While in the beginning Charlie and Joe were sitting closely at the same table, that all changed in the end. Once the fighting started and Louisa was injured, Joe put as much space as possible between himself and Charlie. While the film ends there, and it is never said if Louisa lives or not, it seems likely that Joe never took another sip of rum after this frightening day.

Touching and hand motion also communicate emotional states. For example, when one is angry it is appealing to let that anger out through punching, or when one is expressing sympathy for another after a tragic event, it is only natural to show this through a reassuring hug. Good examples of nonverbal communicative touch are found in the silent film called *A Drunkard's Child*. Siegmund Lubin directed this film in 1909.<sup>11</sup> This film used many aspects of nonverbal emotional communication, but touch was the most important one. His story is about a boy named Louis Campbell. Campbell has an image problem. Other kids refer to him mockingly as "Limp

Louis.” He had suffered from an illness at an early age which left him with a permanent limp that required the aid of a crutch. Louis, however, never lets the degradation stop him from working as hard as he can selling newspapers. He needs the money so that father, Peter Campbell, and his ill mother, Henrietta Campbell, can purchase food. Even though Mr. Campbell works, he never can hand over any money to help support his family. He always wastes it on his cheap whiskey at the local Bear Cave Saloon. It does not matter how many mistakes Mr. Campbell has made in the past because Louis will still try to support him no matter what. But one day everything changes for the better. When Louis is on the street selling his daily papers, he notices that the last man has given him too much money for his paper. Louis runs after the man, hands outstretched with the money, so he can give him the change. This man is Richard Harrington. He tries to persuade Louis to keep the money, saying that he has earned it by being honest. Louis’ hands persist to want to return the money, even though he desperately needs the money to support his dying mother and drunkard father. Once Mr. Harrington finds out about his mother’s illness and the boy’s father, he demands to meet with his mother.

Hands tell the story, and speak of emotional states. Upon being introduced to Mr. Harrington, Mrs. Campbell implores with her hands for him to take Louis and to give him the life she can no longer provide for her son. After seeing that Louis’ mother would likely die soon and meeting his father, Mr. Harrington has made his decision to bring Louis home to live with his wife, Sophia, and himself. Sophia’s loving hands indicate Louis has found a better home. Mr. Campbell, however, does not like that he is losing his son, who provides him with a regular source of income, But Sophia and Richard had been married for 50 years, and they had never been able to have children of their own. After many blissful weeks in the new family’s house, Mr. Campbell comes to seek his revenge on the Harringtons. He comes in like a burglar through the dining room window

with the intent of stealing their hard-earned money. Mr. Campbell is not successful, however, because before he could make his escape he is caught by Mr. Harrington. Immediately hands lunge and grab violently, but once Mr. Campbell appears to be getting the upper hand, a loud gunshot roars through the air hitting Campbell in the back and killing him instantly. After the violence has settled, the Harringtons decide that they will officially adopt Louis into their family so he can finally have the security that comes with a loving family. <sup>12</sup>

Touch and its associated emotions are used in both positive and negative ways in this film. For example, when Mr. Harrington meets Louis for the first time and hears his woes, the reassuring touch that he gives is moving. But when Mr. Campbell uses his hands to cause harm to Mr. Harrington, this was certainly neither caring in any way. His touch was only used for terror or destruction. While Peter Campbell never changed his way of life even after witnessing the death of his wife and the loss of his only child, it still serves as a marvelous warning against the terror of alcohol.

The cultivation of personal appearance can be a great indicator of emotional stability and one's state of mind. The silent film "*The Son's Return*" by D.W. Griffith is a prime example of the importance of appearance. *The Son's Return* was produced in 1909.<sup>13</sup> This film starts off quite sad because it shows two young people in love saying a sorrowful goodbye. Shabbily dressed Wesley Beaverton and the beautiful Violet Pearl have been courting for many months, but Wesley wants to make some money before he proposes marriage to her. After many tears, Violet relents that it would be for the best for them to wait. Wesley then heads back to the Beaver Inn, which his family have owned for many years, to talk to his parents about his decision. Mikel Beaverton and his wife, Margarete, have run the inn for 25 years. They have mentioned many times to Wesley that they are ready for him to take over the family business. So, when Wesley comes to tell his



parents the news of his departure, they are understandably upset. But after he tells them his plans and how passionately he speaks about them, the Beavertons support his future.

Wesley did not guess that his departure would lead to very hard times for his family. These hard times all begin when Mr. Beaverton picks up that first drink after his son leaves for the city. While Wesley is in the city earning a great deal of money, his parents are accumulating debts. After being away for five years, Wesley receives a letter from his mother explaining their financial predicament. Since he has changed so much over the years, and now is dressed in professional attire, Wesley decides that he will try to surprise them by pretending to be a guest at their inn. He was correct when he thought they would not recognize him. But his father does notice the money bag he was carrying. So, his now haggard, and unkempt parents devise a plan to sneak into Wesley's room and take the money while he is asleep. However, they did not anticipate him waking up during their search. Wesley's untimely wake-up causes Mr. Beaverton to strike him in the head, rendering him unconscious. Thinking that he is dead, they quickly wrap him in the bed sheets and hide Wesley's body in the woods. When his parents return home with Wesley's money, they find a startling artifact in his belongings. They find their son's locket which contains a picture of his dear mother. Horrified with their actions, they run to where they left his body in the woods.

Once they arrive, however, Wesley is gone. Violet found his body while she was taking her daily walk through the woods by her house and the sight of him lying there shocks her. She immediately runs to get her brothers, Ralfe and Paul, so they can bring him to safety. Once Wesley is resting comfortably in the Pearl house, the guilt-ridden Beaverton parents come through the door raving about how they killed their son for his money.<sup>14</sup> This film has many displays of varying physical appearance in both Wesley and his parents. Before Wesley left, he wore his old farming hat. That changed when he began his new job and started earning money.

The Beaverton parents did the opposite. They took more pride in their appearance when their inn was prosperous. But when Wesley left, Mr. Beaverton paid more attention to his rum than to his hair or attire. This film was a great example of how degrees of personal upkeep can convey emotional states.

While the eyes as noted above are extremely important in displaying emotions to others, they do not overpower expressive eyebrows. Eyebrows can explain many strong and varying emotions. The eyebrows can be furrowed to show confusion or frustration, point down in anger, or even go up towards the hair line in shock. All of these examples are used in an expressive silent film titled *His Daughter*. It was directed in 1911 and it was filmed by D.W. Griffith, ever more the expert with nonverbal communication.<sup>15</sup> Griffith's film starts off in a small town in Arkansas called Yellowpine. This is the story of two families, one loving, and one that needs repair. Tommy Briar and his father, Mark Briar, have lived in Yellowpine all of Tommy's life, but Tommy has decided to go away to college to better himself. He is hesitant to go because of his father's health and the fear he has for his lovely Georgiana Pringle, the girl he dearly wishes to marry once he returns home.

The Pringle family is well known in the small town of Yellowpine and not for honorable reasons. The Pringles are known for their drunkard father and the destruction that he always causes to the local Sawmill Saloon when they refuse to serve him anymore whiskey. This man's name was Reginald Pringle and he has two daughters, Georgiana and Rosalie Pringle. They are certainly not an ideal family because of their father's constant drinking and anger issues, but these issues only seem to get worse when Georgiana is caught saying farewell to Tommy before he leaves town. Even though she knows her father will not be pleased, she writes to Tommy constantly and goes to the Briar house every week to read her letters with Mr. Briar. After narrowly escaping the

wrath of Mr. Pringle on many occasions for being at the Briar house or for even talking to Mr. Briar, one afternoon, events took a turn for the worst.

Mr. Pringle is on his way home from the saloon when he runs into a panicked Georgiana coming from the direction of the Briar house holding onto a small package. In his state he was unable to think straight to yell at her, so he simply follows her back to their home. When he gets to the window, he sees a sickly Mr. Briar, who has come to Georgiana for help, telling her to hide the money he had saved up for the rest of Tommy's schooling because he is not at home to protect it. Mr. Pringle sees his opportunity. He sneaks away to get a covering for his face so they will not recognize him, and he climbs in through the window. However, a drunk Mr. Pringle is not very stealthy. His ruckus frightens Georgiana into action, and she races for the family gun. After she leads the robber out of the house at gunpoint, Tommy comes barreling around the corner of the house. He has already read his father's letter about his worsening health, and thus Tommy is coming straight home.

Tommy takes the gun from Georgiana and unmasks the burglar she has caught. It turns out to be Mr. Pringle. Immediately he runs away from his daughter and goes straight for his last bottle of whiskey to drown his sorrows of failure. Georgiana heads back to the Briar house to see if the doctor has arrived to check on Mr. Briar and she arrives just in time to hear that all will be well. However, before she can run away and hide in shame of her father's deeds, Tommy catches up to her. He quickly silences all her doubts she has about him, still loving her with all of his heart and that all will be well again.<sup>16</sup> The use of eyebrow communication was used many times in this film mostly to show anger or fear. Mr. Pringle's eyebrows were always facing down in anger while talking about money or the Briar family. And the eyebrows of Georgiana Pringle in many of her parts were drawn together in either fear or great concern for others. Just with simple facial

movements one can interpret many different emotions.

The nose is used for much more than simply detecting smells. It can also be used to show disgust or displeasure about a situation, and thus display a limited range of emotions. In the *The Broken Locket*, the characters display displeasure on various occasions with just their noses. This film was produced by D.W. Griffith in 1909 and he used several methods of nonverbal communication to tell his story effectively.<sup>17</sup> It starts off by showing two good friends, Richard McMill and Jack Williams, staggering home drunkenly from the Baker Saloon. During their struggle to stay upright, they go past Evelyn Mitch's house. Richard and Evelyn have been courting for a few months and she has been struggling with his drinking habits. So, upon seeing him drunk again, she quickly runs after him to make sure that he arrives home safely. However, after chasing Richard in the afternoon heat, Evelyn experiences an episode of dizziness. Her nose crinkles and she falls on the road next to Richard and his friend. Thinking that she was simply being emotional like usual, Richard sends Jack on his way so he can check on Evelyn. Once she has recovered, she begs Richard to head home and not to drink any more whiskey.

The next day Richard goes to call on Evelyn at her house to tell her about his excellent plan to get rich. He explains that he would be going into the city for two weeks to work and once he returns, they will get married. In her sorrow, Evelyn gives Richard a half of her beautiful locket for luck while he is away. Once he arrives in the city, he goes to see Garrison Peters, who is well known for being close to many successful businessmen. However, when Richard goes to meet with Mr. Peters' friend, he is unaware that his life will be forever altered. Peters' friend, Jason Gool, is a well-known saloon owner. Mr. Gool requests that Richard meet him at his saloon, the Silver Horse, to talk about business opportunities. Before the meeting, Richard tells himself that he will have only one drink to ease his nerves about this interview. Mr. Gool, however, has other plans for

Richard. He insists that Richard complete their business deal with a second drink, and Gool's crinkled, shaking nose indicates that the saloonkeeper will not take no for an answer.

While Richard is drinking with his Gool, he meets Scarlet Tule. Scarlet is a singer who performs at the Silver Horse. Richard is immediately attracted to her because of how similar she looks to his dear Evelyn. While Richard is in the city drinking now with another woman, Evelyn is experiencing more episodes of dizziness. When she receives a letter from Scarlet detailing her close relationship with Richard, Evelyn's health takes a turn for the worst. After many days of rest and numerous visits from the local doctor, Evelyn awakens only to discover that she has lost her sight. Her nose twitches and goes crazy. Evelyn tries her best to overcome her blindness.

Richard meanwhile has become a bar hound. He has lost his opportunities and is even thrown out of the Silver Horse. Richard returns home after this because he feels that the city has betrayed him. He stumbles by Evelyn's house just as she and her mother, Alice Mitch, are leaving for a walk. Once Richard sees that Evelyn is blind, he becomes disgusted with himself for leaving her to suffer alone. Instead of apologizing for his past indiscretions and promising to take care of Evelyn until the end of her days, Richard runs away from his problems once again.<sup>18</sup> In this tragedy, Richard and Mrs. Mitch actually were the two characters who showed their displeasure the most with their noses. When he tries to dissuade Mr. Peters from forcing him to drink, Richard turns his nose up to show his disgust. And when Mrs. Mitch sees what has become of Richard after his time in the city, she shows her displeasure by wrinkling her nose whenever she sees him. This film shows that even without words, one is fully capable of showing disgust or displeasure just by moving one's nose.

From today's perspective, many are tempted to regard the silent-film era as antiquated and boring. Without language, explosions, or screeching tires, these films seem to lack the excitement of a Hollywood thriller. But for a movement like Prohibition, that needed people to change their views, film provided the hot new medium that helped turn the nation dry. People of that time were new to film itself. What they were used to was talk. Body language has always been a very expressive way to get one's point across, and these films catered to a new kind of objective reality. One did not need to trust words. One needed only to watch faces, and appearances, and discover a world of seemingly true emotions, and true realities. Suddenly all the statistics, platitudes, and lectures were muted. Viewers saw righteous emotions leaping from eyes and gestures of decent people such as Lucille Byers, Beatrice Hills, Mary Bingley, Louisa Morgan, Limpy Lous, Violet Paul, Wesley Beaverton, Georgiana Pringle, and Evelyn Mitch, and they knew their cause against alcohol was just. And when Jason McMill wrinkled his nose up at the offer of a drink from Mr. Gool at the Silver Horse saloon, or when Wesley Beaverton stared at the faces of his degraded parents, they knew what was wrong. These highly emotional, silent films planted the seed that alcoholism was destroyer of humanity itself. The toxic brew needed to be banned so the world would not have to live with the horrors of people becoming like beasts.

# Endnotes

1. Alice Guy-Blache, "Wonderful Absinthe," February 21, 2016, video, 0:56, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9B-6\\_1HpWU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9B-6_1HpWU)
2. Fritzi Kramer, "Wonderful Absinthe (1899) A Silent Film Review," March 12, 2017 <http://moviessilently.com/2017/03/12/wonderful-absinthe-1899-a-silent-film-review/>
3. Ferdinand Zecca, "Alcohol and Its Victims," September 2, 2015, video, 5:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTOVxJfCk40>
4. *Ibid*, Zecca.
5. D.W. Griffith, "A Drunkard's Reformation," January 29, 2014, video, 9:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrY43xIFT0M>
6. *Ibid*, Griffith.
7. D.W. Griffith, "What Drink Did," September 6, 2014, video, 12:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIJP32WOTE>
8. *Ibid*, Griffith.
9. William A. O'Connor, "Ten Nights in a Bar Room," August 16, 2016, video, 3:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlcDrsdmQgM>
10. *Ibid*, O'Connor.
11. Siegmund Lubin, "A Drunkard's Child," October 21, 2019, video, 6:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai-ANicmslc>
12. *Ibid*, Lubin.
13. D.W. Griffith, "The Son's Return," July 11, 2015, video, 11:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puwFJ4dnXy0>
14. *Ibid*, Griffith.
15. D.W. Griffith, "His Daughter," June 23, 2016, video, 13:57, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF\\_qokjdsKY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF_qokjdsKY)
16. *Ibid*, Griffith.
17. D.W. Griffith, "The Broken Locket," March 4, 2016, video, 12:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDnGMTDGwMw>
18. *Ibid*, Griffith.