

MOVIES AND CONDUCT

CHAPTER I

PROBLEM AND PROCEDURE

PROBLEM

DURING the three past decades motion pictures have become one of the chief forms of amusement in the lives of the American people and have given birth to a giant industry with a formidable financial structure. Corresponding with this growth there has been developing a belief that motion pictures have become one of the largest influences on contemporary life. Touching as they do the daily experience of millions of people in an appealing and magnetic way, it is but natural that many should regard them as wielding a powerful influence on conduct. A perusal of the discussions of motion pictures, however, discloses a singular lack of consensus on the nature of these effects on conduct.

On one side there are many who regard motion pictures as a meliorator of the hard character of modern life, as a surcease to sorrow, as a chief means of infusing romance into a dull world and thereby adding compensation to the ordinary routine of life. This contention is expressed frequently in a more scientific fashion by psychologists and other students of human behavior in the declaration that motion pictures are a means of satisfying in a vicarious and harmless fashion pent-up impulses which might otherwise take a more dangerous expression. By relieving strain, by occasioning a sort of emotional catharsis, motion pictures, it has been asserted, play a genuinely beneficial rôle.

As opposed to this point of view, there is the charge expressed even more vigorously that motion pictures constitute a harmful influence on the lives of people, particularly on the lives of youths. They have been held accountable by many for crime and delinquency and, indeed, for a supposed general weakening of moral standards; the sporadic yet persistent efforts at censorship in some sense may be interpreted as an expression of this belief.

These opposing interpretations make vivid the problem as to the effects of motion pictures. It is to this problem that the present study has devoted itself. Reference may be made in passing to the character of the studies which hitherto have sought to deal with the question. Most of them are frankly not direct studies of the influence of motion pictures, but rather collections of the opinions of people on the supposed effects of motion pictures. These studies, however interesting they may be in revealing the attitudes of different groups of people such as ministers, school teachers, law enforcement officials, etc., are still far removed from showing what motion pictures are actually doing.

There is another kind of study of a more scientific and penetrating character. The investigations of this type have sought to ascertain the influence of motion pictures under experimental and control situations. The attempt usually has been to introduce a number of subjects to a given kind of picture and through the use of questionnaires and other devices to test their reactions. Sometimes summaries of the content of pictures have been presented to people to rate or list in terms of one's feelings. It is not the purpose of this investigation to make an evaluation of these studies; but rather to point out their different character from that which is given in the present volume.

This study is based chiefly on personal accounts given

by people of their experiences with motion pictures. The study aims to ascertain the kinds of influence wielded by motion pictures on conduct, in so far as these can be determined from personal accounts. The study assumes that one way to find out about the experiences of people is to inquire into those experiences. The effort has been always to secure accounts of actual incidents, episodes, and experiences with motion pictures, rather than judgments from the people as to how they believe they were affected by them. Such expressions of judgment, while of interest, have not been accepted as data for this study. As careful safeguards as could be devised were taken to secure reliable accounts. A description of the measures taken to assure reliability is provided in the statements which follow on the procedure employed in this investigation.

The accounts of experiences used in this study have been collected mainly from young men and women, adolescents, and children. No attempt has been made in this study either to compare or contrast motion-picture experiences with experiences from other sources, such as newspapers, fiction, or the theater.

PROCEDURE

IN seeking to throw light on the general problem as to how conduct is influenced by motion pictures the chief reliance was placed on the use of the written life history or the motion-picture autobiography. The subjects and informants from whom information was secured were asked to write in narrative form their motion-picture experiences.

Such motion-picture autobiographies were secured from 634 university students in two universities,¹ from 481 college and junior college students in four colleges, from 583

¹ In the designation of the documents which are cited in this study the term *college student* is used throughout to refer to both university and college students.

high school students, from 67 office workers, and from 58 factory workers. The university students were chosen from classes in Social Science and English. The colleges from whose students motion-picture autobiographies were secured are located in Arkansas, in North Carolina, in New York, and in Illinois. All four colleges were girls' colleges. The high-school students writing the documents were from ten public high schools located in Chicago. The high schools were chosen to represent different levels of economic and social status. The office workers and factory workers were chosen from two concerns located in Chicago.

Some mention should be made of the instructions given to those who wrote the motion-picture autobiographies. In the beginning of the study two classes of university students were asked merely to write in as natural and truthful manner as possible accounts of their experiences with "movies" as far as they could recall them. No further instructions were given. The accounts were written out of class. Usually six to eight weeks were allowed for the writing of the documents. From these and from subsequent documents recurrent experiences were selected as separate items; and from these items there was constructed a form or guidance sheet for the writing of the later motion-picture autobiographies. A copy of this form appears in Appendix A.

It was soon discovered in the course of the initial investigation that there were certain kinds of experiences which the students were reluctant to record in writing. It became advisable to devise some scheme whereby the anonymity of the writer could be provided for, so that he could feel free to write fully about his experiences of an intimate and personal character. At the same time it was desirable to hold the students responsible for serious accounts. Accordingly the following scheme was devised and employed

in securing the greater proportion of the life histories used in this study.

The students of a class chose a small committee of their own who assigned to each student in the class a code number. To prevent the teacher from identifying the author of the documents, they were turned in under the code number. The teacher gave credit to those documents which showed signs of having been seriously written, turned back to the committee a list of the code numbers with the accompanying credit given, and received from the committee a list of the names of the students with the credit given to each. In this way the committee alone knew the names of the students corresponding to the code numbers, yet the committee had no opportunity to read the papers. Each document came to the teacher as anonymous, yet each student received credit for his or her work. This device proved to be especially helpful in giving to the student a sense of protection and inducing in him a greater readiness to write those experiences which he would ordinarily be reluctant to disclose as his own.

The utmost care and attention were devoted to gaining full coöperation from the students. For this purpose it was necessary to build up *rapport*. A very frank statement of the purpose of the investigation was always made so as to avoid suspicion that the investigator was seeking to get "something on the student." To this explicit statement of the purpose of the study was added a request for honest coöperation. Out of this effort to build up mutual confidence came the experience, confirmed on a succession of occasions, that students respond very favorably when asked to be "good sports" and to write freely about the kind of experiences concerned. Stress was also placed on the security in describing private and confidential experience which

each student enjoyed under the arrangement which gave anonymity to his document. The student was asked to be honest with himself in writing his account, not to exaggerate and not to "dress up" his statement.

Certain questions inevitably arise concerning the truthfulness and reliability of the accounts which were secured in this fashion. Several ways of checking this reliability were used in the present study. It was possible in a number of cases to compare the document written by a student with the statement of his experiences secured later through a personal interview. At the time of writing their documents the students had no intimation of the possibility of a subsequent interview covering their motion-picture experiences. In some sixty or seventy cases male university students who had turned in documents were interviewed six months later. In each instance at the end of the interview, when asked, the student volunteered the code number under which his written document had been given to the teacher. This provided an opportunity to compare the content of the written document with the content of the interview. It is assumed that the period of six months elapsing between the two was sufficient for the individual to forget any fictitious or false incidents which he may have given in the motion-picture autobiography. In no instance was there discovered any discrepancy of importance between the experiences related in the document and those in the interview.

The accounts were also checked for internal consistency. In a few, numbering less than twenty, there was evidence of contradiction in the experiences given. These documents, accordingly, were not used in this study. All of the remaining accounts, as far as could be determined by careful scrutiny, were internally consistent.

The chief means of checking the character of the experiences given in the written documents was in the comparison of document with document. The motion-picture autobiographies were written independently by students in different schools and localities. With the exception of the students in the same class, there was little possibility for the exchange of experiences. The comparison of large numbers of documents coming from different groups of people with no knowledge of each other made it possible to ascertain the general run of experiences. The contents of documents coming from different sources yielded substantially the same general kind of experiences. Unless there be some fault in the manner in which students were asked to write, this massing of experiences on a number of outstanding facts points to the reliability of the accounts.

Another source of verification is yielded by the comparison of the content of the motion-picture autobiographies with the content of motion-picture conversations collected from other groups of people. The kinds of experiences which are described in the autobiographies were found to be similar to those dwelt on or alluded to in the motion-picture conversations of different groups. Since these conversations, recorded verbatim as far as possible, were collected in natural and naïve situations, the conformity between them and the autobiographical materials strongly suggests the accuracy of both.

The reliability which has been revealed by the four kinds of checks above considered warrants the conclusion that the subjects did not tend to conscious falsification in writing their motion-picture autobiographies. In instructing the individuals the request was always made to write only those experiences which were recalled vividly. This request seems to have been adhered to consistently. The whole

character of the data collected as well as the conditions under which they were secured shows convincingly that there was little tendency to exaggerate or falsify; if anything, there was a tendency to withhold information. Many kinds of intimate experiences, such as the influence of motion pictures on the sex life of the individual, came forth in the interviews although frequently not mentioned in the autobiographies.

The main use of these autobiographical materials has been to show and illuminate the different kinds of ways in which motion pictures touch the lives of young people. Experiences which recurred with a high rate of frequency in the separate documents have been selected and are presented in this report. A few documents in their entirety are also given, to indicate the types of material from which the quoted experiences have been chosen.¹ It has also been found possible to tabulate statistically many of the experiences spoken of in the documents. These counts can in no sense be thought of as conclusive since individuals were not required to write either one way or another about many forms of experience. Yet since no formal questions were asked and therefore no arbitrary answers solicited, the tabulations may be thought of as having greater value than as if they were based on material secured by a formal questionnaire. As far as possible an effort has been made to secure a numerical statement of the frequency with which a given kind of experience has been described in the mass of documents, whenever that kind of experience has been considered.

Another major source of the information used in this report has been gathered through the personal interview. Eighty-one university students and fifty-four high-school

¹ See Appendixes C, D, E, and F.

students were interviewed on their motion-picture experiences. The college students had previously written motion picture autobiographies; the high-school students had not. These interviews were usually from an hour to an hour and a half in length. A number of grade-school children were interviewed for shorter periods, usually while in the classroom.

The procedure used in arranging for and carrying on these interviews was designed to enlist the fullest coöperation on the part of the subjects. In each case permission to be interviewed was first obtained from the subjects. There was no obligation to submit to an interview. The subject was always told in advance that he might be asked a number of delicate questions referring to intimate phases of his experience. It was found that the subject so forewarned was not disturbed by personal questions asked in the interview. A full stenographic account of the interview was taken. The subject had full knowledge of the presence in the room of the male stenographer. The stenographer, however, was placed at some point behind the subject so as to be out of the subject's range of vision. The interview frequently took the character of a free exchange of experiences, the interviewer talking of his own experience as a means of inducing the subject to talk freely of his. The purpose of the interview was mainly to inquire into intimate experiences which the ordinary student hesitates to write about even under guarantees of anonymity.

No fixed set of questions was followed in the interview; the line of inquiry was allowed to develop in accordance with the nature of the responses of the subject. For this reason the material provided by the interview has been found suitable for illuminating the more intimate effects of motion pictures, although because of this very character it has not lent itself to statistical tabulation.

A third method of securing information for the study has been the collection of conversations on the subject of motion pictures. These accounts, taken as nearly verbatim as possible, were almost always secured by participants of the groups engaged in the conversations. The purpose of this form of investigation was to secure as natural a picture as possible of the kind of conversation which ordinarily goes on concerning motion pictures. It was felt that the content of these conversations would in some sense reflect interests and attitudes and would serve also to show how, through such discussions, an individual may be led to particular interpretations of motion pictures.

These accounts of motion-picture conversations were secured from several fraternities of university students, a number of sororities and girls' groups, and from several "cliques" of high-school boys and girls. Accounts were also secured of conversations of high-school boys and girls at parties. Accounts, further, were secured from boys' gangs, play groups, office girls, and factory workers.

Ordinarily these accounts of conversations were collected by individuals working in pairs and seeking in this fashion to supplement each other. With very few exceptions the reporters were all members of the groups whose conversations were written down. In some instances remarks were taken as they were spoken; in other instances reliance had to be placed on memory. The reporters were instructed not to give any intimation to their groups that they were engaged in recording the conversations which went on. This precaution was taken in order to prevent the introduction of artifice into the remarks of the group. So far as it is possible to determine the workers faithfully obeyed this instruction.

In addition to the use of the motion-picture autobiographies supplemented by interviews and accounts of conversations, a considerable amount of material was collected through the use of direct questionnaires. These were given mainly to children. The principal questionnaire employed is given in Appendix B. It was distributed to 1200 grade-school children in the fifth and sixth grades of twelve public grade schools in the city of Chicago. Three of these schools were located in areas with very high rates of delinquency, four in areas with medium rates of delinquency, and four in areas with low rates of delinquency.¹ The other school was a special school for truants and boys with behavior problems. The questionnaire was simple, and the manner of its presentation raised no unforeseen problems.

It should be mentioned, finally, that use was made of direct observation of children. The behavior of children in small neighborhood motion-picture theaters was watched as far as time and opportunity would permit and yielded some interesting information. Also of value has been the observation of children while playing after seeing motion pictures.

It is perhaps needless to say that all of these different lines of inquiry taken together have yielded a wealth of material, only a portion of which is being used in the present report. Only that which seems most significant has been chosen. It should be remembered by the reader that the accounts of motion-picture experiences which are given in the report are only a small fraction of the instances which are on hand. They have been chosen as representative of types of experiences on each of which many instances are available.

¹ The delinquency areas used as bases of selection were those worked out for the city of Chicago by Mr. Clifford Shaw. See Shaw, *Delinquency Areas*, Chicago, 1929.

The general plan of procedure followed in the report has been to let the accounts of experience speak for themselves. Consequently they are used very liberally. The remarks of the author are limited mostly to interpretation.