

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

SOME REMARKS ON METHOD

THIS study is regarded by the author as exploratory in character. It arose in response to an effort to see what could be learned about the influence of motion pictures by inquiring into personal experiences. The procedure employed has been as simple as possible, for the only task involved was that of inducing people to write or relate their motion-picture experiences in an honest and trustworthy fashion. Efforts were always made to secure the frank and sincere coöperation of the informants.

The writer is not unaware of the criticisms which are often made of autobiographical statements. Without seeking to treat categorically these criticisms in so far as the present study is concerned, in the writer's judgment they do not apply significantly to the material which has been collected. The accounts of experiences which have been secured are numerous. They have been written independently of one another. The fact, therefore, that on major items they substantiate one another can be taken, in the writer's judgment, as a substantial indication of their reliability and accuracy.

The study has been confined to experiences with motion pictures. No effort has been made to compare or to contrast these experiences with those which arise through other influences. We are not in a position, consequently, to make any remarks of an evaluative character concerning the rôle

of motion pictures in comparison with other agencies playing upon the lives of people.

The writer feels that the statement of findings in this report errs, if at all, on the side of caution and conservatism. To an appreciable extent the people who have furnished their experiences represent a sophisticated and cultured group. This is perhaps not altogether true of the high-school students who have furnished autobiographies, but it is quite true of the university and college people whose experiences have been employed. Our findings suggest that motion pictures are less influential in the case of people who have had access to higher institutions of learning. To this extent the picture which is presented by this study is underdrawn if it be regarded as depicting the action of motion pictures on the lives of the greater mass of the American population. However, these remarks are not meant to imply any substantial differences in the kinds of experience which people of different strata of our society have as a result of witnessing motion pictures; they are meant merely to suggest that the degree of influence of motion pictures is less in the cultured classes than it is in the case of others. With this one qualification the writer believes that his findings apply to the bulk of movie-goers.

STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

A SUMMARY of the more important of the specific findings of this study is given here. We have indicated the great influence of motion pictures on the play of children. We have shown that motion pictures serve as a source for considerable imitation. Forms of beautification, mannerisms, poses, ways of courtship, and ways of love-making, especially, are copied. We have shown the influence of motion pictures on fantasy and day-dreaming. We have treated

at some length the ways in which motion pictures may influence the emotions of the spectators, showing in particular how they may arouse terror and fright in children, sorrow and pathos among people in general, excitement and passions of love chiefly among adolescents. We have indicated how motion pictures provide people with schemes of life, fixed images, and stereotyped conceptions of different characters and modes of conduct. We have called attention to the way in which motion pictures may furnish people with ideas as to how they should act, notions of their rights and privileges, and conceptions of what they would like to enjoy. We have indicated, finally, how motion pictures may implant attitudes.

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

THESE effects which have been discovered are not to be considered as separate and discreet. They invite interpretation. We have introduced some statement of their significance while treating them in the separate chapters. Here we may endeavor to offer a more embracing explanation.

Since the overwhelming bulk of our material has been drawn from adolescents, or young men and young women, it will be convenient to view our findings with respect to their situation and problems.

In our society, the girl or boy of adolescent age is usually being ushered into a life which is new and strange. It is frequently at this period that the boy or girl begins to feel the attractions and the pressure of more adult conduct. New situations arise in their experience for which they are not likely to be prepared in the way of previous instruction. It is a time when new personal ambitions and hopes and new interests appear, particularly those which involve association with the opposite sex. In the case of the girl, in

particular, desires for beauty, for sophistication, for grace and ease, for romance, for adventure, and for love are likely to come to the fore.

The influence of motion pictures upon the mind and conduct of the adolescent is more understandable if we appreciate this condition—to wit, that he is confronted with a new life to whose demands he is not prepared to respond in a ready and self-satisfying way; and that he is experiencing a new range of desires and interests which are pressing for some form of satisfaction.

In the light of this situation it is not strange that motion pictures should exert on the adolescent the kinds of influences which have been specified. Motion pictures show in intimate detail and with alluring appeal forms of life in which he is interested.¹ Before his eyes are displayed modes of living and schemes of conduct which are of the character of his desires and which offer possibilities of instructing him in his own behavior. In a sense, motion pictures organize his needs and suggest lines of conduct useful for their satisfaction.

It is not surprising that the boy or girl should copy from motion pictures forms of conduct which promise to serve immediate interests. Some attractive way of dressing, some effective form of make-up, some gracious mannerism, some skillful form of making love may catch his or her attention and be imitated because of the possibilities which it promises. When such forms of conduct are clothed with romance and attended by successful consequence, as they are likely

¹ It is important to consider that the movies do not come merely as a film that is thrown on a screen; their witnessing is an experience which is undergone in a very complex setting. There is the darkened theater—itsself of no slight significance, especially in case of love or sex pictures; there is the music which is capable not merely of being suggestive and in some degree interpretive of the film but is also designed to raise the pitch of excitement, to facilitate shock and to heighten the emotional effect of the picture; there are the furnishings—sometimes gaudy and gorgeous, which help to tone the experience.

to be in motion pictures, their appeal is apt to be particularly strong. Further, since these forms of life represent experiences which the adolescent yearns for, that they should profoundly incite and color his fantasy is to be expected. Likewise one can understand how life as it is displayed in the movies may yield the adolescent a picture of the world as he would like to experience it and so give direction and focus to desires and ambitions. And finally, that motion pictures should grip the attention of the adolescent and stir profoundly certain of his emotions, as that of love, is not puzzling in the light of our remarks.

These considerations establish motion pictures as an incitant to conduct as well as a pacifier of feelings. It is insufficient to regard motion pictures simply as a fantasy world by participating in which an individual softens the ardor of his life and escapes its monotony and hardships, nor to justify their content and "unreality" on this basis. For to many the pictures are authentic portrayals of life, from which they draw patterns of behavior, stimulation to overt conduct, content for a vigorous life of imagination, and ideas of reality. They are not merely a device for surcease; they are a form of stimulation. Their content does not merely serve the first purpose, but incites the latter result. What might be intended to have the harmless effect of the former may, on occasion, have the striking influence of the latter.

These remarks should make clear that motion pictures are a genuine educational institution; not educational in the restricted and conventional sense of supplying to the adolescent some detached bit of knowledge, some detail of geography or history, some custom, or some item of dress of a foreign people—but educational in the truer sense of actually introducing him to and acquainting him with a

type of life which has immediate, practical, and momentous significance.¹ In a genuine sense, motion pictures define his rôle, elicit and direct his impulses, and provide substance for his emotions and ideas. Their modes of life are likely to carry an authority and sanction which make them formative of codes of living. Despite their gay and entertaining character, motion pictures seem to enter seriously into the life of young men and women, particularly of high-school age.

Because motion pictures are educational in this sense, they may conflict with other educational institutions. They may challenge what other institutions take for granted. The schemes of conduct which they present may not only fill gaps left by the school, by the home, and by the church, but they may also cut athwart the standards and values which these latter institutions seek to inculcate. What is presented as entertainment, with perhaps no thought of challenging established values, may be accepted as sanctioned conduct, and so enter into conflict with certain of these values. This is peculiarly likely in the case of motion pictures because they often present the extremes as if they were the norm. For the young movie-goer little discrimination is possible. He probably could not *understand* or even *read* a sophisticated book, but he can *see* the thing in the movies and be stirred and possibly misled. This is likely to be true chiefly among those with least education and sophisticated experience.

Where, as in disorganized city areas, the school, the home, or the community are most ineffective in providing adolescents with knowledge adequate for the new world into which they are entering, the reliance on motion pictures seems to become distinctly greater. Where the molding

¹ The movies may also acquaint the person with aspects of life which, in his own age group, he probably would not have any notion about until later. Their promotion of premature sophistication seems significant.

of thought and attitude by established institutions is greater, a condition of emotional detachment seems to be formed which renders the individual immune to the appeal of much that is shown in motion pictures.

It seems clear that the forte of motion pictures is in their emotional effect. This is to be expected since in the last analysis they are a form of art—even though popular art—and their appeal and their success reside ultimately in the emotional agitation which they induce. To fascinate the observer and draw him into the drama so that he loses himself is the goal of a successful production. As we have sought to show, while in this condition the observer becomes malleable to the touch of what is shown. Ordinary self-control is lost. Impulses and feelings are aroused, and the individual develops a readiness to certain forms of action which are foreign in some degree to his ordinary conduct. Precisely because the individual is in this crucible state what is shown to him may become the mold for a new organization of his conduct. This organization, of course, may be quite temporary, as it frequently is. However, as our cases have shown, occasionally it may be quite abiding.

Another observation is in point, an observation which, in the judgment of the writer, is of major importance in seeking to estimate the rôle of motion pictures. We refer to the conspicuous tendency of commercial motion pictures to dull discrimination and to confuse judgments. One of the chief reasons for this effect lies in the variety, the inconsistency, and the loose organization among the emotional states which are stimulated. This is to be expected in view of the fact that the aim of motion-picture productions is merely that of provoking emotion whether it be done by playing on the themes of horror, excitement, romance, adventure, particularly passionate love, or what not. In con-

trast to other educational institutions motion pictures have no definite goal of conduct. They are not seeking to establish any definite set of values. They are not endeavoring to provide a consistent philosophy of life. Their aim, as stated, is essentially mere emotional stimulation.

Just because they have at hand in such an effective fashion the implements of emotional stimulation yet do not employ them consistently towards any conscious goal, their effects, ultimately, are likely to be of confusion. The movies generally play upon the whole range of human emotions, frequently with such realism and intensity as to leave the youthful person emotionally exhausted. The kaleidoscopic change that is involved in mood and receptivity of the spectator is so great that emotionally it may put demands on him which make him callous, or leave him indifferent to the ordinary requirements of emotional response made upon him in his workaday world. As far as his mind is concerned the result of this scattered emotional indulgence is confusion. A variety of impulses may be awakened, a medley of feelings aroused, a multiplicity of day-dreams engendered, a mass of ideas suggested—all of which, at best, are likely to hang together in a loose organization. It seems that such a multiple and loosely integrated reaction is typical of the impressions left by the ordinary movie—more typical when movies are considered collectively. In so far as one may seek to cover in a single proposition the more abiding effect of motion pictures upon the minds of movie-goers, it would be, in the judgment of the writer, in terms of a medley of vague and variable impressions—a disconnected assemblage of ideas, feelings, vagaries, and impulses.

We recognize two other conspicuous ways in which motion pictures confound discrimination and dissolve moral

judgment into a maze of ambiguous definitions. One is the sanctioning of questionable or unexpected conduct by running a moral through it. Although the general tenor of a movie, or even its *leitmotif*, may be of an "idealistic" sort, so much often has to be taken into the bargain in the way of trimmings that discrimination becomes confused and the effect is lost. The ideal of the theme may stamp its character on the details of the setting which are meant to be kept apart.¹

We conclude by directing attention to the other source of confused discrimination and judgment—the possible divergence between the standards of the directors of the pictures and the perspective of movie-goers. What may be intended by the producer and the director as art, may be accepted by the movie public, or significant portions of it, as pornography. The difference, if it exist, is obviously a matter of interpretation. But the standards and codes of art which transform things into aesthetic objects may be limited to a select number. Other people with different standards can scarcely be expected to view these things in the same light. To justify the depiction on the ground of aesthetic character, or "art for art's sake," seems to overlook the major premise of the situation. It circumscribes the area of judgment to the perspective of the director and those whose attitudes he represents. What may evoke aesthetic satisfaction on their part may stimulate others in an unmistakably contrary fashion. Unless the aesthetic values and interpretation of the movie public are changed to conform to those of the directing personnel, it is anomalous to defend commercial depictions on the basis of their art value, and to charge unfortunate effects to the basemindedness of people.

¹ A good example of a picture of this sort was *Our Dancing Daughters* where, in the experience of many, the qualities of fair play and good sportsmanship tended to envelop and give sanction to forms of conduct such as freedom in relations between the sexes, smoking, drinking, petting, etc.