

The Twenties, 1921–1929

23-1 Motion Picture Diaries

During the 1920s the Hollywood-based movie industry became the most popular form of mass culture in America. A national audience in the tens of millions went to the movies regularly and followed the lives of the stars with an almost religious fervor. Young people in particular responded to the allure of motion pictures. The following excerpts from diaries kept by young movie goers during the 1920s provide a look at how they felt about and responded to the new medium.

SOURCE: Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct* (Macmillan, 1933), pp. 220–223, 243–247, 251–257.

STUDENTS' "MOTION PICTURE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES"

A GIRL OF 22, COLLEGE SENIOR, NATIVE WHITE PARENTS

I have tried to remember the first time that I went to a movie. It must have been when I was very young because I cannot recall the event. My real interest in motion pictures showed itself when I was in about fourth grade at grammar school. There was a theater on the route by which I went home from school and as the picture changed every other day I used to spend the majority of my time there. A gang of us little tots went regularly. . . .

Goodness knows, you learn plenty about love from the movies. That's their long run; you learn more from actual experience, though! You do see how the gold-digger systematically gets the poor fish in tow. You see how the sleek-haired, long-eared, languid-eyed siren lands the men. You meet the flapper, the good girl, 'n' all the feminine types and their little tricks of the trade. We pick up their snappy comebacks which are most handy when dispensing with an unwanted suitor, a too ardent one, too backward one, etc. And believe me, they observe and remember, too.

I can remember when we all nudged one another and giggled at the last close-up in a movie. I recall when during the same sort of close-up when the boy friend squeezes your arm and looks soulfully at you. Oh, it's lotsa fun! No, I never fell in love with my movie idol. When I don't know a person really, when I know I'll never have a chance with 'em, I don't bother pining

away over them and writing them idiotic letters as some girls I've known do. I have imagined playing with a movie hero many times though; that is while I'm watching the picture. I forget about it when I'm outside the theater. Buddy Rogers and Rudy Valentino have kissed me oodles of times, but they don't know it. God bless 'em!

Yes, love scenes have thrilled me and have made me more receptive to love. I was going with a fellow whom I liked as a playmate, so to speak; he was a little younger than me and he liked me a great deal. We went to the movie—Billie Dove in it. Oh, I can't recall the name but Antonio Moreno was the lead, and there were some lovely scenes which just got me all hot 'n' bothered. After the movie we went for a ride 'n' parked along the lake; it was a gorgeous night. Well, I just melted (as it were) in his arms, making him believe I loved him, which I didn't. I sort of came to, but I promised to go steady with him. I went with him 'til I couldn't bear the sight of him. Such trouble I had trying to get rid of him, and yet not hurt his feelings, as I had led him to believe I cared more than I did. I've wished many times that we'd never seen the movie. Another thing not exactly on the subject but important, I began smoking after watching Dolores Costello, I believe it was, smoke, which hasn't added any joy to my parents' lives.

COLLEGE GIRL, 18, NATIVE BORN OF WEALTHY SWEDISH PARENTS

Upon going to my first dance I asked the hairdresser to fix my hair like Greta Garbo's. Of course I did not tell the hairdresser that I was copying this intriguing and fascinating actress or she would think I had gone insane. I, the "nicest" girl, whom mothers to this day set as an example to their daughters and young sons. Oh, the unconscious cruelty of father when he forbade me pleasures other children had and have, and I partly made up this injustice to myself by seeing a picture once or twice a year and living them over and over again. I lived the life of the heroine and used my little sister for the rival or unpleasant character, very seldom the good character. The rival afforded me more opportunity to be dramatic. In speaking on graduation day I did my best to finish with the swaying-like curtsy which Pola Negri taught me from the stage.

Somehow or other Dolores Costello has not taught me mannerisms, but what beauty is. When I see her I cannot help but truly believe that there is a God, creator of the beautiful. She brings to me that deep feeling of beauty and all that goes with beauty—love, truth, sympathy, etc.

Only at one time did the movies decide my yielding to a temptation which my better self condemned. I

regret it very much. I had been fond of a dark boy, somewhat like John Gilbert, who had proposed many times while I was a sophomore in high school. He seemed perfect to me at the time. His family are among the best known aristocrats and he was supposedly intelligent. How I dislike him for this lack of the “supposed intelligence.” He did not realize what he was asking me to do but they are not all of that type. One evening after he had built more alluring castles than usual, I decided it would be romantic to run away with him. No longer would I be under my dear but misunderstanding father’s strict rules.

At that time we lived some distance from here in an enormous home with a beautiful garden surrounding it. My “hero” was to wait near the thick bushes, and to help me to get out through the windows as soon as it was dark. I had scarcely flashed the light as the signal, when father came into my room. He had been told by the gardener or someone else that somebody was lurking among the trees. He came to warn me about closing my windows, and found me with my clothes packed. No one outside of father, the boy, and I will ever know this, but it hurt all of us.

Because my father had been very strict in his beliefs, regarding marriage, rights of women, and these beliefs gave me many chances to rebel unsuccessfully. I was in a mood to listen and see other beliefs. Sometimes before this again unsuccessful rebellion I had seen a runaway marriage which had impressed me tremendously—I did think that having a hero like this dark boy to protect me from father’s anger and strictness would be heaven. Curiously enough I was more interested in the details of escaping—how the girl got her clothes down, how she got down, what he did to help her down—all these details I watched more carefully than the rest of the play in the runaway marriage. . . .

A BOY OF 17, HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR, NATIVE BLACK PARENTS

The earliest movie stars that I can remember were Wm. S. Hart and Tom Mix who played entirely in West-

ern stories. I liked to see them shoot the villain and save the girl and “live happily ever after.” It caused me to shout as loudly, or louder, than the rest. Following them came Douglas Fairbanks, who seemed so carefree and light that he won nearly everyone with his personality. He would jump, use a lasso, thrust a sword, and fight in a way to satisfy any child’s desire for action. Now I have no special star but I think Emil Jannings is a great actor because he seems to put his heart and soul into his work.

As a boy, I went with nearly every one to the theater; my mother, father, sister or brother, relatives, and friends. Usually I went in the afternoon or evening, anywhere from one to five times a week. Now I still go with my relatives occasionally but mostly with friends or alone.

I cannot recall anything that I have done that I had seen in the movies except try to make love. It happened that when I was small there were no boys in my neighborhood and I had to go several blocks before I could play with some my size or age. But there were a few girls in my neighborhood my size. Seeing Douglas Fairbanks woo his maiden I decided to try some of “Doug’s stuff” on one of the girl friends. I know I was awkward and it proved more or less a flop.

Several times on seeing big, beautiful cars which looked to be bubbling over with power and speed, I dreamed of having a car more powerful and speedier than all the rest. I saw this car driven by myself up to the girl friend’s door and taking her for a ride. (I was then eight years old and in my dreams I was no older.)

1. *What aspect of movies makes the deepest impression on these young people? Which fantasies and emotions seem most touched?*
2. *What do the diaries suggest about how people used movies in relation to their family lives and friends? Compare this to your own experiences today.*

6. A Report on the New Moral Code, 1925

Last summer I was at a student conference of young women comprised of about eight hundred college girls from the middle western states. The subject of petting was very much on their minds, both as to what attitude they should take toward it with the younger girls, (being upperclassmen themselves) and also how much renunciation of this pleasurable pastime was required of them. If I recall correctly, two entire mornings were devoted to discussing the matter, two evenings, and another overflow meeting. . . .

Before the conference I made it my business to talk to as many college girls as possible. I consulted as many, both in groups and privately, as I had time for at the conference. And since it is all to be repeated in another state this summer, I have been doing so, when opportunity offered, ever since. . . .

One fact is evident, that whether or not they pet, they hesitate to have anyone believe that they do not. It is distinctly the *mores* of the time to be considered as ardently sought after, and as not too priggish to respond. As one girl said—"I don't particularly care to be kissed by some of the fellows I know, but I'd let them do it any time rather than think I wouldn't dare. As a matter of fact, there are lots of fellows I don't kiss. It's the very young kids that never miss a chance."

That petting should lead to actual illicit relations between the petters was not advised nor

countenanced among the girls with whom I discussed it. They drew the line quite sharply. That it often did so lead, they admitted, but they were not ready to allow that there were any more of such affairs than there had always been. School and college scandals, with their sudden departures and hasty marriages, have always existed to some extent, and they still do. But only accurate statistics hard to arrive at, can prove whether or not the sex carelessness of the present day extends to an increase of sex immorality. . . .

I sat with one pleasant college Amazon, a total stranger, beside a fountain in the park, while she asked if I saw any harm in her kissing a young man whom she liked, but whom she did not want to marry. "It's terribly exciting. We get such a thrill. I think it is natural to want nice men to kiss you, so why not do what is natural?" There was no embarrassment in her manner. Her eyes and her conscience were equally untroubled. I felt as if a girl from the Parthenon frieze had stepped down to ask if she might not sport in the glade with a handsome faun. Why not indeed? Only an equally direct forcing of twentieth century science on primitive simplicity could bring us even to the same level in our conversation, and at that, the stigma of impropriety seemed to fall on me, rather than on her.

9. Changing Moral Values: A Visual Essay

A. Art Young Comments on the Sexual Revolution, 1927



"Mother, when you were a girl, didn't you find it a bore to be a virgin?"

D. Hollywood Explores the New Value
System, 1929

SEE! HEAR!
CLARA
BOW



IN

**DANGEROUS
CURVES**

Directed by
Lothar Mendes

DANGER that lurks in the curve of smiling lips. Danger that lurks in the love-charms of two women—rivals in love. Dangerous Curves in the road of romance. What happens? HEAR Clara. SEE "It!"

A Paramount Picture