

“‘The Jazz-Mad Flapper of Cinemaland’ and the Language of Disability in the 1920s”

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Historians have assigned many names to the period between the First World War and the Great Depression. It was the Roaring Twenties, one of the “anxious decades” or a time of “discontented America.” Textbooks frequently call it the New Era, a nod to the emergence of the “new woman,” the “new Negro,” and other seemingly “new” elements of the decade. Other names arise from characteristics of the period: the Prohibition Era, the Jazz Age, the Golden Age of Sport, or the “Republican ascendancy.” The period also has been described as a “search for a modern order” or a “modern temper” after a “rebellion against Victorianism” and amidst “the perils of prosperity.”

These and other names have roots in the period, but contemporaries used other descriptions for their era which historians have failed to notice. Observers at the time described an “idiotic era,” when a “moron majority” of “shell-shocked,” “deaf and blind” Americans confronted a “jazz monster” which created “jazz maniacs;” others thought of jazz more as a physician able to cure “cripples.” In short, the language of disability permeated the period. This paper explores this way of thinking about the 1920s, taking as its starting point one of the most influential, though least understood, figures of the period—“the jazz-mad flapper of cinemaland,” Clara Bow.