

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 20

Seventh-day Adventists and the Theater

Part IV

(F. M. Wilcox, *Review and Herald*, April 8, 1937)

I have said much during the last few weeks about the evils of theatrical moving pictures. I have felt that our institutions, especially our schools and sanitariums, are threatened by grave danger in the presentation of some of these pictures before their students and guests. I believe it is a greater evil to present these pictures in our institutions than it would be to witness them apart from the institution.

The question naturally arises, Is there a class of moving pictures which can be profitably exhibited to the guests in our sanitariums and to the students in our training schools? I believe there is. In this, as in many other things, we must discriminate between the evil and the good. We must show here the same discriminating judgment exercised in the choice of the books and magazines we read. This discrimination will lead us to turn away from the highly fictional, the vulgar, the impure, from books and stories with sex appeal, and read that which is elevating, uplifting, and ennobling.

We must exercise this discrimination in the food we eat. The markets of today teem with a large variety of vegetable and animal food products. An educated judgment will lead us, under ordinary conditions, to discard the latter, and to satisfy our physical needs with food which is drawn from the vegetable kingdom. We must exercise this same sense of discrimination in the clothes we wear. We shall be led to choose an attire which is simple, modest, and dignified.

At the recent spring meeting of the General Conference Committee, held at Takoma Park, Washington, D.C., March 10, 1937, earnest study was given to this question which we have been discussing in the REVIEW during the last few weeks. There had previously been appointed a committee on visual education, to give study to principles and standards in the use of motion pictures. This committee reported at the spring meeting, and this report was adopted, as follows:

The projection of motion pictures into the modern world, followed by their vast exploitation, has thrust upon the church a problem of grave proportions. The seriousness of this problem calls for a clear statement of the fundamental principles involved, and for a courageous stand thereupon by the leadership of the church.

Pictures are not wrong merely because they move. The motion picture is simply an animated photographic reproduction. There is legitimate use of motion pictures for purposes of education, enlightenment, and recreation. And there are sharply defined basic principles involved that determine the right or wrong of the motion-picture film, as verily as of reading, dress, or association. These principles we should recognize and apply firmly, consistently, and unitedly. They involve *what* is taught, the *way* it is taught, *where* it is taught, and *by whom* it is taught.

There is, first of all, a fundamental distinction between natural pictures, or pictures of real life, and pictures of dramatized theatrical plots. *This is a basic line of demarcation.* By the former are meant scenes reproduced through the motion-picture camera wholly of natural life, whether of persons, animal or plant life, events, or

places, and which are recognized, within certain limitations herein set forth, as legitimate and proper for Christians, and for the organizations and institutions of the church.

In contrast, there are the motion pictures of dramatized theatrical plots, usually produced by professional actors and actresses. The very principle upon which these are constructed is inherently wrong, and cannot be approved or condoned by the church. The history and the present estate of the theatrical drama show it to be opposed to the highest ideals of morality, and alien to spiritual life. Its themes are built upon human passion. It graphically presents, by portrayal and by suggestion, the sins and crimes of humanity,—murder, adultery, robbery, and every other evil. Even its attempted depiction of virtue is feeble, and frequently false. And its conception of love and of love-making desecrates the most intimate and sacred relation of man and woman.

Theatrical films are evil in their influence, and consequently unacceptable, because they confuse the thinking of our people regarding the Seventh-day Adventist attitude toward the theater, the opera, and novel reading; because they create an appetite for emotional reaction which can be satisfied only by further indulgence; and because they make an unwarranted play upon the emotions. This is wrong because emotional stimulation without appropriate action is destructive to character development. Pictures which play upon the emotions create an appetite for the sensational, causing the individual to live in the realm of the unreal, destroying responsiveness to duty, and resulting in emotional instability.

The motion-picture house has so popularized the theater that millions are daily in attendance at exhibitions which can only exert an influence to lower standards of Christian purity. We believe that in no small degree it is responsible for the present breakdown of morality. There can therefore be no compromise here without tragic loss and fundamental mistake. While it may be necessary at times to go to theatrical buildings for evangelistic meetings, or to hear wholesome lectures or musical concerts, we should avoid, just as far as possible, attendance at places devoted to shows and theatrical performances.

In education we are directed to build only upon the real, the actual, and the true, and to turn away from the false, the speculative, and the fanciful. In literature we are cautioned against the fictional and the unreal. In dress we are to abandon the artificial, the showy, the merely decorative. In diet we are asked to discard the impure, the corrupting, and the hurtful. In character building we are admonished to reject all sham and pretense. So, likewise, in our relation to the motion picture, silent or sound, we must definitely choose only “whatsoever things are true,” honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report; and deliberately refuse that which is untrue and unreal, which involves sham and pretense, or which is impure and corrupting. All such pictures should, because of their inherent wrong, be barred from use by the church, its organizations, institutions, and members.

With such basic principles clearly established, we therefore take a definite and positive stand against all dramatized motion pictures which use character representation for the purpose of acting out a theatrical plot. Such dramatization of imaginative plots, as a method of creating impressions, influencing life, or conveying information, should not be employed in God’s service, and is not to be countenanced by His people. We, therefore, call upon our entire church membership, young and

old, to take their stand upon this platform.

With such basic principles clearly established and accepted in our selection of films, we are convinced that certain motion pictures can be used effectively and helpfully in God's cause, for purposes of education, enlightenment, and wholesome entertainment. For the aid of those charged with the responsibility of selection, we here submit a list of suggestions, further expanding and applying the aforesaid principles, by which motion-picture films to be used in our churches, schools, sanitariums, or elsewhere in connection with our cause, may be adjudged, and either approved or rejected. We believe that the fundamental principles and standards here set forth will prove helpful to committees, boards, and individuals required to make decisions in the choice of films. These are tabulated under two heads, (1) "Acceptable Films" and (2) "Unacceptable Films," though we are conscious of the fact that this listing is neither final nor complete, but is only a general guide in selection.

I. Acceptable Films

a. Industrial Pictures.—Pictures showing processes of manufacture, lumbering, mining, oil production, public utilities, transportation, commerce, transmission of news and information, etc.

b. Scenics.—Pictures of national or other parks, natural scenery, mountain climbing, exploration, and the like.

c. Travelogues.—Pictures of other countries, their national habits, customs, and life (excluding scenes that may have a corrupting influence).

d. Nature and Wild Life.—Pictures of the Forest Service, of animal life in various States and nations. The life development of insects, plants, fishes, birds, and animals (excluding those which emphasize cruelty).

e. Art and Archeology.—(Excluding films that portray indecent and corrupt art.)

f. News Reels and Current History.—(Excluding films which are contrary to our recognized standards.)

g. Educational Films.—Films which impart information and teach truth in any branch of learning.

h. Pictures of Places.—Those associated with historical incidents.

i. Our denominational work and activities.

2. Unacceptable Films

a. Films portraying Christ and inspired men.

b. Pictures portraying romantic love-making.

c. Films portraying scenes which are contrary to Seventh-day Adventist standards and ideals, such as popularized dancing, card playing, gambling, drinking, etc.

d. Films portraying crime or glorifying criminals.

e. Films portraying scenes of violence or cruelty, such as prize fighting.

f. Films which lower esteem for the sanctity of marriage by portraying family

disruptions, or ridiculing home life and home relationships.

g. Films portraying scenes of night life, drinking, carousing, gaiety, revelry, rowdiness.

h. Films portraying scenes of smoking as a social activity. (Pictures portraying processes of manufacture, for example, in which the operator might happen to be smoking, might not be included in this category because the attention of the observer is centered upon the process rather than upon the smoking as a desirable activity.)

i. Films which by ridicule, suggestive insinuation, or crude comedy, lower in the estimation of the observer, religion or the ministry, or the dignity of human personality, or law-enforcing agencies.

j. Films of a scientific or historical character which blend misrepresentation of facts with the actual.

k. Popularized historical films which distort facts of history and pervert truth, or which present scenes of cruelty and bloodshed.

The Responsibility

I commend to the earnest study of our readers the excellent principles presented in this report. I believe that if the suggestions given are followed, the character of motion pictures shown in some of our institutions will be entirely changed.

None should exercise a spirit of censure or condemnation for what has been done. Abuses have crept in, not because of intent or purpose, but through thoughtlessness, through a lack, largely, of information and of a knowledge of the underlying principles which should govern the selection.

I believe that the managers and faculties in our various institutional families are laboring in the fear of God to meet the situation which confronts them. They need our prayers that God will uphold their hands, and help them to stay the tide of evil with which Satan would submerge the church.