

# **The Christian And The Film Arts**

**by Herman Hanko**

## **Introduction**

The problem of the film arts, as we treat it in this pamphlet, is somewhat more broad than the title itself would suggest. Usually the subject is limited to various dramatic presentations captured on film and shown in the theaters around the country. However, in our treatment of this subject we wish also to include the dramatic presentations which are given "live" on stages, whether that be on Broadway or on the stages of our local High Schools and Colleges. Further, we include in this discussion the dramatic presentations which come into our homes via the television sets which have become such a large part of our life.

## **The Problem of Drama**

It is especially this later which has become a very real problem in the lives of the people of God. Generally speaking, within our denomination, our parents frown upon theater attendance and prohibit their children from attending movies. But our children and young people are often puzzled and angry about the fact that while parents condemn theater attendance, the same movies which are shown in the theaters are piped into the homes via television and are watched assiduously by the same parents who refuse to let their children go to "shows". Our young people complain about this to their ministers and teachers and, sometimes, to their parents. They are offended, and rightly so, for they put their fingers on a strange inconsistency in our lives. Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus: "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Ephesians 6:4. Surely, though among others things, the apostle means by this that parents provoke their children to wrath when they insist that their children observe various principles of Christian conduct which they themselves openly flaunt. Parents seriously compromise their own principles and the spiritual well-being of their families when they do this.

## **Related Problems**

From another point of view, however, the subject is broader than the title would seem to suggest because it involves various related questions. It involves, *e.g.*, the very important question of ungodly propaganda; for the film arts are a mighty instrument for propaganda whether we are always conscious of this or not. And the question involves the place of entertainment in the lives of the people of God. Is there a legitimate place for entertainment in our lives? And, if so, what?

## **The Christian Reformed decisions**

To my knowledge, the Christian Reformed Church is the only denomination which has faced this problem of the film arts on a Synodical level and has come to some specific and definite conclusions about the matter. To get at this whole problem, it is valuable to consult these decisions and investigate what this denomination has said on the problem.

In 1928 the Christian Reformed Church made various decisions concerning the well-known trio of worldly amusements: theater attendance, card playing,

and dancing. All three were condemned by that Synod because the Synod considered these worldly amusements to be incompatible with the life of the Christian in the midst of the world. With specific reference to theater attendance, the Synod gave four reasons why this form of amusement was wrong.

(1) Attendance at theaters may cause a brother to stumble.

(2) No one knows whether a play or movie is good or bad until he has seen it. And, if it is bad, the damage is done.

(3) Some so-called good movies are worse than the bad ones.

(4) Occasional theater attendance may develop in a person a taste for movies with the result that the Christian may become movie-addicted.

It is interesting to notice, concerning these grounds, that the Synod of 1928 put the whole matter of theater attendance and the film arts in the area of Christian liberty. That is apparent already in the first ground: Attendance may cause a brother to stumble. This is, of course, the area of Christian liberty. Cf. *e.g.*, Romans 12. But by doing this the Synod implied that the film arts are not *per se* wrong. The wrong lies not in theater attendance itself; the wrong lies in its misuse. It is true that the Synod suggested that it is almost impossible to use the film arts rightly, and that therefore, it is better if people do not attend movies at all. But the fact remains that the film arts were not condemned as wrong in themselves. The dangers of their use were emphasized.

It is not strange therefore, that this decision did not really settle the matter. Periodically, over the course of the years, overtures came to the Synod to reconsider this matter. Almost always, the Synod refused such requests and reaffirmed the decisions which had been taken in 1928. But in 1965 again an overture came to Synod asking once more that the decisions of 1928 be reconsidered. The ground offered for this request was that the decision of 1928 was unworkable and was, as a matter of fact, being openly and widely flaunted.

A committee was appointed to study the matter. The committee confirmed the findings of the overture by means of a denomination-wide poll and discovered, rather to its chagrin, that the majority of the membership had at one time or was at the present attending movies. The committee drew up a very lengthy report on the subject and presented it to the Synod of 1966. This report was adopted with only minor changes.

The basic position of the committee was that the film arts were not *per-se* wrong and that it is permissible for the Christian to attend good movies. In fact, the committee considered it desirable to attend good movies and urged upon the Churches to busy themselves in subjecting the film arts to the dominion and rule of Jesus Christ. There were especially three arguments which were used to support these contentions.

(1) The principle was established that entertainment, amusement and recreation are permissible in the life of a Christian.

(2) The position was taken, not surprisingly, that it is not at all strange that the ungodly world is capable of producing good movies because of the general operation of the Spirit in the hearts of the ungodly by which sin is restrained and the world enabled to do good. The obvious reference is, of course, to the second and the third point of common grace adopted by the Synod of 1924.

(3) The assertion was made that along with newspapers, radio, television,

newsmagazines, art, etc., the film arts are a legitimate “cultural medium”. This means that culture, good culture, culture pleasing to God, in the broadest possible meaning of that term can be conveyed to people via the medium of the film arts.

For the moment, I wish to focus attention on the third ground. It is clear that at this very crucial point in the argument the committee is guilty of a very serious logical error. This error is, first of all (and this becomes very clear if the report is read), that the committee lumped together all the different kinds of the film arts. It spoke of travelogues, educational films, home movies which parents shoot on their 8mm cameras of their children in the backyard swimming pool and dramatic presentations as being the same, and described them as legitimate cultural media. In the second place, the committee simply asserted the fact that such movies *are* legitimate cultural media without offering any proof for this. But this is precisely the point that needs proving. At the very heart of the argument no proof of any kind was offered.

## **Grounds for condemning the movie**

This puts the whole question into sharp focus. On what grounds are movies to be condemned? If they are condemned at all. Are they to be condemned because there are practical objections against theater attendance and because not all movies are good? If these are the only grounds, then the decision of the Synod of 1928 is acceptable and sufficient. Probably that Synod stated the case against movies from a practical point of view as well as it can be stated. But if there are only practical objections against theater attendance, then the door is left open. There are good movies. Why cannot they be seen by the Christian? Is it not possible to make use of good movies and is it not possible that the life of the child of God will be enriched by such movies?

I shall not enter into the practical objections against movies in this pamphlet. The best discussion of this subject is still to be found in the pamphlet “The Movie” published by the Sunday School of the First Protestant Reformed Church and is available from them. It describes in vivid detail the terrible sins portrayed in the film art.

The question which is of concern to us is: Is there not a deeper objection against movies? An objection which condemns them out of hand?

Before we answer this, we must make a careful distinction between different kinds of the film arts. In one class must be placed home movies which record delightful experiences in the life of a family, educational films, travelogues, etc. In another class must be placed all movies which are dramatic presentations. It is bad logic to lump all movies together into one class. To the first class we have no objections. It is with the second class that we have our quarrel. But when the second class is defined in terms of dramatic presentations, it must be remembered that this class also includes dramatic presentations which appear on the television screens in our living rooms and family rooms, the dramatic presentations offered on Broadway and on the platform of the local High Schools and Colleges, dramatic presentations in whatever form they come.

## **Is Drama *per se* wrong?**

Is it possible to take the position that drama is, *per se*, wrong? It is my

conviction that it is. This is not a conviction to which I have come in the course of preparing this pamphlet. It is a conviction which I have held already when a youth when we used to argue these questions with all the fervency of youthful interest. It is a conviction that had to stand the battering of long hours of disputation and debate. And it is a conviction which has grown stronger with the years.

Drama is sin. It is a sin in the sight of God. It is a terrible sin which brings down upon those who engage in it God's severe judgment. This judgment comes not only at the end of life and at the end of the ages when all men stand before the judgment seat of Christ. But it is a sin which brings God's judgment already in this life to the one who commits it. It is a sin which God will not permit to go unpunished.

What is the argument?

Drama is, by definition, the presentation of the life of another person, whether real or fictitious, by the assumption of that person's personality for purposes of entertainment. The key point here is that drama is possible only by assuming another's personality. Any textbook on drama will emphasize this. The "gifted" actor is the person who is able to suppress completely his own personality and assume the personality of another. The more he is able to do this, the better actor he is. He must, to be successful, assume to himself all the thoughts, all the desires, all the emotions, all the feelings of the person whose role he plays. He must, as much as he can, make himself that person. He must make himself feel as that person feels, think as that person thinks. He must, so to speak, crawl behind the skin of that man and get into his bones and marrow to lay hold of that person in the very depths of his being. He must put himself deeply inside that person so that he looks through the person's eyes, down that person's nose, and experiences all that that person feels and thinks.

### **Assume another's personality?**

This is a sin. It is a sin to do this. A man may not assume the personality of another. This is wrong, in the first place, because the person in man is that part of him which is God-created in a special sense. We often make a distinction between body and soul. We say then that the body comes from the parents, while soul comes from God. While we need not go into this matter in any detail, this distinction is incorrect. It is better to use the distinction between person and nature. And then we may say that our natures come from our parents, while our persons are directly created by God. This follows, after all, the analogy of the Lord Jesus Who received His human nature from Mary while His person was the Second Person of the holy trinity.

But, if this is true, then the person is that part of the individual which has the direct stamp of God upon it and which sets a man apart from every other person who has ever lived. This stamp is put by God according to God's purpose and in order that God's intent may be accomplished in him. He stands alone in life as unique, marked by God Himself. This is clear from identical twins. Twins may be so similar in physical appearance that it is impossible even for their teachers and ministers to tell them apart. But a mother can always tell the one from the other because she knows these twins intimately and sees the vast differences in their "personality" though their physical appearance may be identical.

But because every person is created by God, we do violence to our person when we push it aside in order to assume the personality of another. We deny our God-given person to assume the personality of someone else.

In the second place, the sin of this can be demonstrated by means of another consideration. All will have to agree that in assuming another personality there are only two possibilities. The one possibility is that of assuming the personality of a sinner. But if an actor assumes the personality of a sinner, he must, in the nature of the case, assume all that person's sin. He must think his evil thoughts, experience his evil emotions, will his evil desires, speak his evil words, and do his evil deeds. He must assume all those sins and make them his own in a very deep and intense way.

The other possibility is to assume the personality of a saint. The only One Who lived a sinless life was, of course, the Lord Jesus. And in various passion plays, attempts are made to dramatize Christ Himself. It would seem that this is dramatic presentation at its best and highest. But can any child of God, sensitive in even a little way to the profound mystery of the incarnation -God become flesh to dwell among us - fail to recognize this as the grossest blasphemy? How can a mere man portray dramatically the suffering of the eternal Son of God?

But there have been saints in the world; and one may ask whether it is ethically right to portray the life of a saint. We may use the illustration of Martin Luther who himself describes for us the long and profound struggle to attain peace with God. But here too, one immediately senses that this may not be done. Luther's struggle was so holy, so profoundly sacred, so intensely personal a matter between him and his God, that for an actor to attempt to make these experiences his own becomes a presumptuous intrusion on holy ground where angels tremble to stand. To enact (and that for purposes of entertainment) the trembling fear of Luther before a holy God, to present dramatically the spiritual conquest of Luther's heart by sovereign grace is a wicked parody of that which is most sacred.

The judgment of God rests upon sins of this sort. We have only to look upon the lives of those who have devoted themselves to such a career. Their personalities are destroyed and the psycho-analysts do a multi-million dollar business in trying to help these confused, mixed-up, wretched people live even a semblance of a normal life. They have destroyed themselves in the depths of their being, and God's judgment is upon them. They sink deeper and deeper into the morass of sin from which there is no escape except in death. For the Christian, this all belongs to the Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18 which shall be destroyed.

## **The Jewel of Consistency**

But it must be clearly understood that a condemnation of dramatic presentation must be consistent. It is wrong in the films that are produced for showing in the local theaters. But it is no less wrong in the movies that are shown on our television screens and in the plays offered live on the stage. Would to God that we would once and for all condemn these things completely and without compromise. We would surely no longer be an offense to our young people and a stumbling block to them in their lives. This is a terrible thing when covenant parents, entrusted with the responsibility of guiding the feet of their children in the paths of righteousness, set snare for their feet by

watching on television what they condemn in the theater. I must admit that, on this question, I am on the side of our young people who are puzzled and confused by such conduct. It is our calling to root it out of our lives.

## **Film Arts as Propaganda**

The film arts are also a mighty engine of propaganda. I do not think it is possible for the world to improve on the film arts as an instrument of ungodly instruction.

God has created man with various doors that open to his soul. There are five such doors: the five senses. Of these five senses, the eyes and the ears are the most important. Most of our impressions enter our souls through these doors not only; but the impressions which enter these doors make the deepest and most lasting marks upon us. If the doors of the eyes and the ears are closed through deafness and blindness, a man is almost 90% cut off from the world about him and from contact with his fellow men. The film arts present their material to our souls through these two doors and are the most potent forces for propaganda which can be invented.

The world itself recognizes the power of this and is sometimes critical of it. Very recently I read an article in the *Grand Rapids Press* in which an unbeliever fiercely condemned these so-called innocent children's cartoons. He pointed out, as one illustration, that he had watched them all over a long period of time and kept careful statistics of what was shown in them. He discovered that in them almost 70% of what was shown dealt with violence in one form or another. He decried this and spoke eloquently of the harm we were doing our children by permitting them to watch this stuff. It is embarrassing. The world shouts on occasion: "Do not watch this stuff, it is doing you harm!" The people of God say: "What is so bad about it? It is innocent enough entertainment for the children."

The assumption here is that all that the world produces is evil. We take issue here with the second ground of the committee of 1965 and with the Synodical decisions of 1966. It is not necessary to enter into a lengthy debate on the subject of common grace. It is sufficient to assert, for our purposes, that the Scriptures teach the total depravity of the natural man. Man apart from grace does nothing pleasing in God's sight.

But this negative truth can be positively stated in this way. The unregenerated man does only evil and lives his whole life out of the principle of rebellion against God. He is not neutral doing neither good nor bad. He who is not *for* Christ, is *against* Him. But in his rebellion against God, he is intent on making propaganda to spread his vicious views. In the film arts the world conveys its whole world and life view. Sometimes this is done explicitly and forthrightly; but much of the time in a very subtle way. The "world and life view" is implied. It comes directly. And this is precisely what makes it all so very dangerous and devilish. The world, in its propaganda tells us what it thinks about God. It tells us what it thinks about man and the relationships in which men must live together.

It tells us what is its view of sin, of salvation, of heaven and hell. But mostly all this is implied; it is the background, the assumption, the hidden values- which appear only indirectly. But it is all there nonetheless. In a subtle way, often not even consciously detected, it is there. The world is telling us in the most "innocent" and hilarious situation comedies what it thinks about the

institution of marriage and what are its opinions on the relationships between husbands and wives. It tells us what it considers important in the duties and obligations of parents and children. It tells us its attitudes towards sex, crime, violence, bloodshed as well as home-life, school-life and work.

This is partly why, for example, the world always laughs at that which is contrary to Scripture. It glorifies life's greatest tragedies. It finds humor in the "hen-pecked" husband. It laughs uproariously at the stumbling, bumbling father. It thinks the disobedient child, the Dennis the Menace is humorous. But while we laugh and howl about these things, the devil laughs in hell. We are being influenced in subtle and devious ways. The holy and sacred institution of marriage is being mocked. The solemn injunctions of Scripture are being maligned. "Husbands, love your wives...." "Wives, submit to your husbands...." "Children, obey your parents...." All these and many more injunctions of Scripture are the butt of the jokes of the world and the object of their ridicule.

But all the while, we are being influenced. While we laugh and howl, while we weep and cry, impressions are being made on our souls. Evil propaganda is eating, cutting, destroying, eroding, forming, shaping, twisting our souls and our lives. A whole set of values is being instilled in our minds and the minds of our children which are wholly contrary to the Word of God. It is all happening while we are having a good time, enjoying ourselves, being entertained. Drop by poisonous drop there seeps into our souls, the world and life view of ungodly men.

## **Lip Service to Principle?**

But the principles of Scripture are given only lip service. They are nice principles, good to read from time to time; they are fine subjects for an occasional sermon and proper to discuss once in a while when the elders come on family visitation. We may even want to talk about them in society. But in our homes and in our daily lives, where it counts, we let the world do our instructing. We have been hurt, deeply hurt by it all. There is good reason why, even in the church, disrespect for authority of every kind is a growing problem. There is reason why many marriages are troubled and unhappy, why marital problems occupy a large part of the ministers' time. We have forgotten the ABC's of Scripture on these things because we have listened too long and too intently to the world. And we have been taught at the feet of antichrist by this mighty engine of propaganda which instills in us anti-Scriptural views while we are oblivious to the harm done to our souls.

More than this, we have built up in us a kind of an immunity to sin. It is possible to become immune to sin. This is a terrible thing, but a real threat nonetheless. One can hear sin justified, laughed at, mocked, encouraged so long that one loses his sensitivity to sin. He can read Ann Landers so often and see so many sex-filled films and be so bombarded with sex that he is immune to its sin. Gradually, calluses are built up in his soul. And the result is that sin does not shock any more. Gradually, bit by bit, he considers sin to be of minor significance. He is not shocked by it. He no longer feels revulsion and spiritual pain. He forgets that God's majesty is defamed and His holiness flaunted. And at last, he begins himself to condone sin and excuse it. He has been instructed in the world's views of God and life. He is about ready to graduate with his diploma in his hand for a life of worldliness and carnality.

It is this which is to be feared in the film arts.

That is, in those film arts which are dramatic presentations.

Only God knows how much has already been done to the Church by this evil.

## **Legitimate entertainment**

In its grounds for the justification of making use of film arts, the committee also spoke of the fact that entertainment is a legitimate part of the Christian life.

That this is an important part of the whole question of dramatic productions goes without saying. In fact, it is really not an exaggeration to say that this is the chief purpose of dramatic productions. This is evident even from the reaction of our children to educational films. If they see an educational film in school, they classify such a film as being very good or a "dud". And if you inquire as to the criterion on which they make their classification, you will learn that the good educational films are the dramatic presentations while the duds are not. In other words, we try to spoon into our children a few drops of worthwhile education, sugar coated with drama. We sandwich a dose of castor oil between layers of orange juice. Dramatic productions are above all entertainment.

And this raises the interesting question of the place of entertainment in the life of the child of God.

To say that there is a legitimate place for entertainment in the life of the child of God is to state the obvious. There is, I think, no question about it that the child of God may relax, have fun, enjoy himself and the good gifts of God.

But it ought to be remembered that this is not really the point at issue. The point at issue is, especially in connection with dramatic productions, precisely what place entertainment occupies. It is not saying too much to insist that the question of the rightness and the wrongness of drama would probably never be a serious one, if it were not for the fact that we live in an entertainment-orientated age. Evidently, even the study committee which reported on the film arts felt something of this when they included a statement on the legitimacy of drama in their report.

All the emphasis in our age is on having a good time. Everybody has to have fun. A sixty-hour work week has been cut down to fifty, and then forty, and presently thirty. And the aim is to abolish work altogether. Forgotten is the fact that God created man to work. But work must be abolished or, at least, sharply curtailed so that man may spend his time in the pursuit of pleasure. He *needs* his vacations, his time off, his hours of pleasure.

The point is that we have adopted a set of values in life which is far from Christian. It is not that entertainment, relaxation, and pleasure are wrong in themselves. But they have assumed a place of *primary importance* in our lives. We have forgotten that the life of the Christian is a battlefield, not a playground. We have interpreted joy and happiness in terms of a can of beer at the local tavern, a bloody game of professional football, forty miles an hour on water skis behind a speedboat. We have forgotten and denied that true joy and pleasure is to be found in the keeping of God's commandments and in seeking the things which are above. The joy of the Lord is lost in the superficial and hollow laughter of pleasure.

It is well to ponder the fact that if even half the money spent on eating out, buying new boats and cottages, campers and trailers, television sets and



sports equipment were given to the Church, many causes of God's kingdom would have more than sufficient money to do the work that needs so badly to be done.

## **The Problem**

It is here that the problem of drama arises. We need to be thrilled, entertained, excited, titillated. We need new amusements to savor on our dulled palates. We need new stimulations of pleasure to awaken our dulled sensibilities and arouse anew our emotions. And so we need to face, again and again, the problem of drama. If only we could put entertainment in its proper place in the life of the Christian, the problem of drama would all but disappear.

Our problem is not, first of all, is drama right or wrong? Our problem is first of all, what does it mean to be a pilgrim and a stranger in the earth? That problem needs solving above all else.

Drama belongs to Babylon. Revelation 18 may very well be called "The Gospel of Babylon's Fall". The chapter is a horrible picture of the judgments which shall come upon the harlot riding her scarlet-colored beast. Babylon in all her glittering glory, with all her lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes and pride of life shall be destroyed. But the angels sing: Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen. But to those who earnestly desire to walk as pilgrims and strangers in the earth come the solemn words of vs. 4, 5: "Come out of her my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities."