

MODERN MOVIES:

MARVELOUS MEDIUM
OR
MORAL MENACE?

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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MODERN MOVIES: MARVELOUS MEDIUM OR MORAL MENACE?

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1A. INTRODUCTION:

A strange shift in spiritual sensibility among saints has taken place in relation to the movie theater. Two generations ago, in the early days of the cinema, many believers would cross to the other side of the street rather than pass by what they considered to be the temple of satan. The movie industry was roundly condemned. A generation later a certain group of believers started to condone the movie industry and became selective in their attendance of movies. Currently, while the subject matter of films has generally gone from bad to worse, a large segment of Christendom never voices any misgivings of the movie industry. Indeed, many films are recommended. Further, the medium of the secular cinema theater is used as an evangelistic outreach.

Is the movie industry wordly and wicked, carnal and corrupt, as the fundamentalists thought? Or is it a marvelous medium which is neutral and necessary, contemporary and commendable? The concerned Christian should have clear convictions on this controversial, contemporary conundrum.

2A. THE DILEMMA FOR THE COMMITTED CHRISTIAN:

1b. The strange silence of the fundamental pulpit:

- 1c. Most pulpits ignore the topic altogether.
- 2c. Many pastors issue critical remarks without basic justification for the position.
- 3c. Some pastors speak out only on clearly vile or blasphemous films.

2b. The perplexing paradox of evangelical periodicals.

- 1c. Neoevangelical periodicals review films and encourage theater attendance.
- 2c. Fundamental periodicals revile films and discourage attendance of the sinful cinema.



3b. The distinct discrepancy between the church's position and the Christian's practice:

1c. A number of church covenants take a stand against worldly amusements such as dancing and the attendance of theaters.

2c. Numerous church members disregard their church's teaching and attend the theater.

4b. The present paucity of publications on the subject:

1c. The major works on the subject are dated and sorely need revision: Robert L. Sumner, Hollywood Cesspool (see bibliography).

2c. Rarely do any books on ethics discuss the cinematic controversy.

5b. The eventual emergence of Hollywood films on television.

1c. Abstinence from the theater does not mean one can avoid Hollywood films, since many appear on television.

2c. The availability of films on video cassettes compounds the problem for concerned individuals.

3c. In actuality, television films, especially those on cable T.V., are frequently more problematic than films shown in the theater.

6b. The evangelical employment of film evangelism:

1c. Modern movie theaters are used for evangelistic efforts.

2c. A secular medium is used to disseminate a sacred message.

3A. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

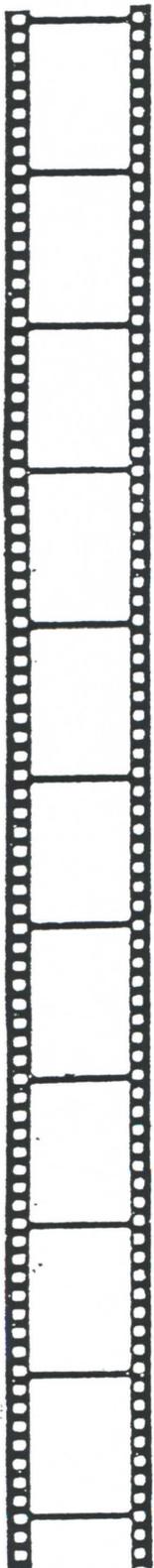
1b. The period of invention: 1890-1910

1c. Thomas Edison's invention of the Kinetoscope on April 14, 1894. This was a coin-in-the slot peep show. A viewer dropped a coin in a slot and viewed the action through a peep hole.

2c. Thomas Armat invented the Edison Vitascope on April 23, 1896. A magic lantern projected intermittent movement on a large screen.

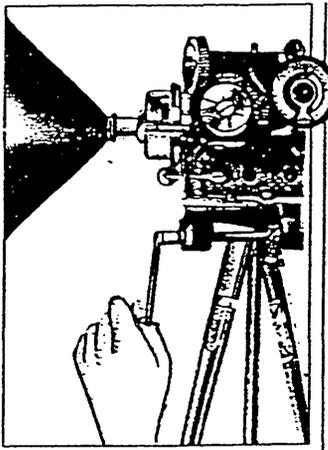
2b. The period of silent films: 1910-1920

1c. The films were characterized by humor and romance.



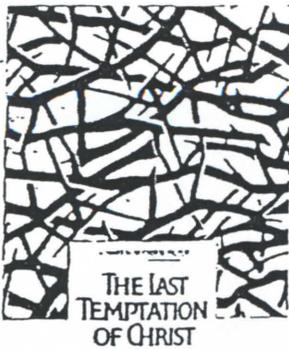
MOVIES

FILM



- 2c. The movies were spurned by the rich people but loved by the poor.
- 3c. Charlie Chaplin epitomizes this epoch. He eventually was barred from the U.S.A. because of sympathies for Communism and antipathy for America (Sumner, pp. 116-117, 120).
- 3b. The period of the classics: 1920-1940
- 1c. Walt Disney began his production in 1923 and in 1938 "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" was made.
- 2c. Epic films of classic works appeared.
- 3c. Hollywood became the hotbed of Communist sympathizers. Even Encyclopedia Britannica admits: "In the U.S. the first documentaries were made under the Soviet . . . influence [and] reflected the thinking of the extreme left wing" (1971, XV, 917).
- 4c. Movie attendance was regarded as a necessity rather than a luxury. Movie theaters became, says Britannica, "Cathedrals of the Cinema," palatial places. The reasons given by Britannica for the rise of movies during that period is most illuminating:
- "The public, old as well as young, wanted to see how the wealthy lived, dressed and misbehaved, and skillful directors such as Cecil B. DeMille helped educate an entire nation in the boudoirs, lingerie and riotous living. The worship of the stars reached delirious proportions" (1971, XV, 913).
- 4b. The period of Westerns and crime films: 1940-1950
- 5b. The period of sex and scandals: 1950-1960
- 1c. Several classic films were made in the mid-60's such as "The Robe," "The Ten Commandments," "Around the World in 80 Days," while at the same time cheap horror films were produced such as "I Was a Teen Age Werewolf."
- 2c. Hollywood turned more and more to sex and scandal to lure people back to the movie houses.
- 3c. The popularity of television caused havoc in Hollywood. The income of movie houses in 1947 had been \$90,000,000. By the 1960's that sum had shrunk to \$42,000,000. In 1945 there were 20,355 movie houses throughout the United States. By the 1960's there were only 11,300 left.
- 6b. The period of shockers: 1970-1990
- 1c. The categories of films:
- 1d. Films about satanism and witchcraft:

Coming attractions: even more numerous and elaborate movies to feed a insatiable appetite.



- 2d. Films about weird encounters and extraterrestrials.
- 3d. Hard-core pornography films such as "Deep Throat"
- 4d. Films of blasphemy: "The Last Temptation of Christ"
- 2c. The classification of films: Hollywood introduced the rating of films: G, PG, PG-13, R, X.

4A. THE DISAGREEMENTS IN CONSERVATIVE CIRCLES

- 1b. The historical position of fundamentalists:
 - 1c. The position on personal holiness:
 - 1d. Sound doctrine is the basis of spiritual life.
 - 2d. A godly life involves enmity with the world.
 - 2c. The position on worldly amusement:
 - 1d. A rejection of the amusements of the world: Drinking, gambling, cards, dancing, movies
 - 2d. A separation from the allurements of the world.
 - 3d. A dedication to the activities of a godly life: Bible studies, street meetings, retreats, prophetic conferences.
 - 3c. The position on cultural isolation:
 - 1d. Isolation was not so much from the world but its inimical effects.
 - 2d. Their concern was personal holiness.
 - 1e. This effected everything from appearance to amusements.
 - 2e. If they erred, they did so on the side of righteousness.
 - 3d. Their desire was to be close to God:
 - 1e. They were accused of legalism in the area of worldly amusements.
 - 2e. They were motivated by a loyalty to the holy Savior.
- 2b. The cultural compromises of Neoevangelicalism:
 - 1c. Neoevangelicalism's disenchantment with fundamentalism:



CINEMA

E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL
Screenplay by Melissa Mathison; produced and directed by Steven Spielberg.

Spiritual metaphors abound in *E.T.*, a captivating tale of a seemingly timid, misshapen creature from outer space, and Elliott, the young boy with whom *E.T.* develops a psychical relationship after he is marooned on earth. *E.T.* is no ordinary fantasy, but a sophisticated production by Hollywood's foremost director, Steven Spielberg. The Universal film promises to be this year's blockbuster.

One can't help but see messianic significance in *E.T.* He heals cuts with a touch of his glowing finger and raises shriveled flowers to life. Indeed, *E.T.* himself rises from the dead in a scene that brings cheers from the audience.

Spielberg intends for his audience to have a spiritual experience. Even the movie's newspaper ad invites a direct comparison to Michelangelo's creation scene—only the hand arching downward is not God's, but *E.T.*'s.

The relationship of Elliott to *E.T.* is a "type" of the Christian's relationship to Christ. In a touching scene, Elliott says to *E.T.*, "I'll believe in you all my life." And we, too, want to place ourselves in *E.T.*'s hands and believe. As *E.T.* prepares to leave earth, he lifts his glowing finger to Elliott's forehead and cryptically states, "I'll be here." A new Pentecost?

- 1d. Inquiry into the inerrant Scriptures. Many new evangelicals questioned the complete accuracy of Scripture.
- 2d. Influence by modern science. Theistic evolution was being taught by a number of new evangelical scholars.
- 3d. Inebriation with contemporary scholarship. Fundamentalists were labeled as obscurantists. Friends, unwilling to bear the reproach of personal holiness, which is foolishness to the world, defected from the fundamentalists camp.
- 2c. Neoevangelicalism's desire for penetration of the world and church:
 - 1d. Not isolation from the world but infiltration of its institutions.
 - 2d. Not separation from error but accommodation with error.
- 3c. Neoevangelicalism's defense of the cultural mandate:
 - 1d. The world in all its aspects is to be used by man and nothing is to be considered evil.
 - 2d. The institutions of the world are neutral and can be used to good advantage.
- 4c. Neoevangelicalism's distain for personal separation:
 - 1d. Former fundamentalists regarded the movement as cultic.
 - 2d. Neoevangelicals show love for the liberals while fiercely opposing fundamentalists. Typical for attacks on fundamentalism is Edward John Carnell's sarcasm:

"The fundamentalist is also very certain that movie attendance is sinful, for the movie industry is a tool of Satan. . . . Fundamentalists defend the gospel, to be sure, but they sometime act as if the gospel read, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, don't smoke, don't go to the movies, and above all don't use the Revised Standard Version--and you will be saved. . . ."

Whenever fundamentalism encourages this sort of legalism, it falls within the general tradition of the Galatian Judaizers" (The Case for Orthodox Theology, p. 121).

While the fundamentalist considers the world's system as basically evil and avoids, rightly or wrongly, contact with worldly amusements as much as possible, the new evangelical, having become worldly-wise, no longer has a negative response to social drinking, dancing or attendance at movies.

5A. THE DEFENSE OF THE CINEMATIC COMPROMISE

- 1b. "We are selective and only attend good movies."
- 1c. The movie industry is one of the most corrupt expressions of this satanic world system. Frequenting the theater seems to be the antithesis of being unspotted by the world.
- 2c. Others observing us attending will not share the same discernment. They will justify their actions by ours.
- 2b. "Movie attendance is little different from seeing the film on television. Besides, purchasing or renting a video is no better than buying a ticket to a movie."
- 1c. Frequenting the theater involves support of Hollywood. Watching television does not entail the expenditure of funds.
- 2c. While it could be argued that the purchase or rental of a video is tantamount to the purchase of a theater ticket, it is a much less direct support of the movie industry. For instance, because a certain supermarket chain is owned by the Mormon Church, does my purchase of groceries there constitute an underwriting of Mormonism? The matter is best left up to the individual's conscience.
- 3b. "We attend the theater for the sake of evangelistic outreach when Christian films are shown."
- 1c. The proclamation of the pure gospel in an impure and iniquitous environment such as the theater is a clear violation of the mandated separation from the world. The end never justifies the means.
- 2c. The advertisement of Christian films on the movie page of the newspapers is highly incongruous with Christian commitment. Not only this, but it is ethically suspect because the advertisement is normally so neutral or vague, that folks are virtually conned into attending a Christian film.



WALT DISNEY



MGM UA



ORION

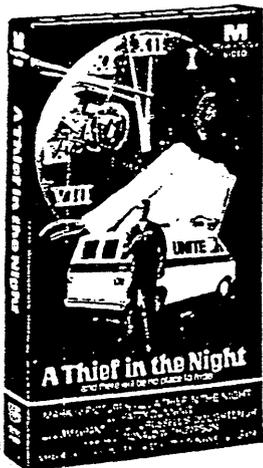


- 3c. Every believer rejoices when souls are saved. But just because sinners are saved by viewing a Billy Graham film in the theater, this does not justify such a method of evangelism.
- 4b. "The prohibition of the theater smacks of legalism. The believer, however, has liberty in Christ."
- 1c. Legalism engages in practices or abstains from practices to gain favor with God. Legalism is not simply a list of do's and don'ts.
- 2c. The avoidance of the theater is not legalism. The separated believer realizes that while all things are lawful, not all things are expedient (1 Cor. 6:12). And yet, fundamentalists generally do not consider the movie industry as one of the doubtful things which fall under the category of Christian liberty. They avoid the cinema because of their desire for personal purity and the command to abstain from every appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22).
- 5b. "The believer needs to be informed as to what is going on in the world to be better able to witness to the unsaved."

1c. It is easily possible to be familiar with the content of the film, simply by reading reviews in the newspapers or periodicals. Even a moderately well-informed person would know the blasphemous subject matter of "The Last Temptation of Christ" before it ever appeared in the movie theater.

Chilling prophecies come to life in this acclaimed thriller. Patty is a modern young woman living for the moment with little concern for the future . . . Until she awakens one morning to find her husband and millions of other people have mysteriously vanished.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT



2c. This argument is fallacious because it assumes that a believer must participate in sin in order to counsel the sinner. The Christian is in the world, is to minister to the world but is commanded to keep himself unspotted from the world.

3c. There is a place for Christian film evangelism. However, films are never to replace the preaching of the Word nor are they to be shown in a questionable environment. Films and dramatic presentations are, in a sense, modern-day parables. In Mark 4:33-34 we are informed that Christ taught primarily in parabolic form, using illustrations to convey spiritual truth. Mark IV Pictures of Des Moines takes its name from this passage in Mark 4. Its films, along with those of Heartland Productions of Des Moines are the most frequently shown Christian motion pictures in America. Through one film alone, "Thief in the Night," shown in public halls and on television, over one million people have trusted in Christ. One does not need to use the theater to obtain spiritual results.

A stubborn businessman, a bible carrying preacher, and a host of comic characters battle for control of a small mid-western town. A warm and witty satire, fun for the entire family. Arm yourself with laughter - and fight the good fight!

WHITCOMB'S WAR



If Christ used parables to communicate spiritual truth, parabolic presentation of the Gospel need not be suspect as it is in some circles. A.W. Tozer, after giving a rightful warning about the evils of Hollywood, makes a blanket condemnation of all religious motion pictures:

"Surely it requires no genius to see that the Bible rules out pictures and dramatics as media for bringing faith and life to the human soul.

The plain fact is that no vital spiritual truth can be expressed by a picture. Actually all any picture can do is to recall to mind some truth already learned through the familiar medium of the spoken or written word." (The Menace of the Religious Movie, p.8)

Tozer is correct in warning that the religious movie is the "lazy preacher's friend" (p. 28) but when he states that there are only four methods ordained by God to communicate truth: prayer, song, the preached word and good works (p. 20) he does not take into consideration Old Testament communication of truth. Ezekiel was told to act out the coming siege of Jerusalem (Ez. 4:1-3) and to act out the duration of the Exile by lying on his left side and on his right side (Ez. 4:4-8). God uses both parabolic and pictural representation to teach truth.

- 6b. "All Christians are attending the movie theater, so why shouldn't I?"
- 1c. This observation is simply not true. All Christians do not attend the theater. Besides, if many believers do see movies, if they engage in social drinking, or if they buy lottery tickets, it simply reflects on the darkness of the hour in Christianity and the departure from holiness in our churches.
- 2c. Even if most Christians were attending the theater, would that make it right? We do not take a Gallup poll on what is a sinful activity and what isn't. The inspired Scriptures and the indwelling Spirit alone show which conduct is suitable and unsuitable for saints. The majority decision is not necessarily the proper position.
- 7b. "I would rather have my children attend good movies with me rather than bad movies without me."
- 1c. Parents are to set an example of personal separation and purity. By ignoring the distinction between worldly and godly activity, parents hinder rather than help the spiritual discernment and development of their offspring.

MOVIES

- 2c. Even the most innocuous films are frequently preceded by advance advertisement of immoral films. Attenders of "The Right Stuff" may suddenly see scenes advertising "Deep Throat."

6A. THE DEMAND UPON CHRISTIAN CONDUCT:

1b. Appropriate association:

1 Cor. 15:33, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners."

- 1c. The believer is called to select his friends and environment carefully. Our environment helps us or hinders us in our Christian life.

- 2c. Association with the theater and its crowd has a deleterious affect on the individual. Good morals are destroyed by evil associations.

2b. Befitting behavior:

1 John 2:15, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

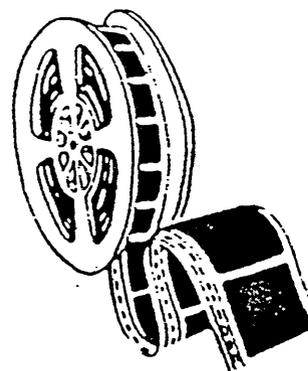
- 1c. The Christians horizontal relationship to the satanically controlled world system is indicative of his understanding of his vertical relationship to his Father.

- 2c. Sadly, the whole world is controlled by Satan (1 John 5:19) -- and that is particularly uncontestably true of the entertainment industry. The believer's behavior should be consistent with his belief that the Savior has delivered him from the kingdom of Satan and translated him into the kingdom of the Savior (Col. 1:13). Our love and allegiance are to Him.

3b. Christian conformity:

Rom. 12:1-2, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."



1c. The believer, in order to determine the perfect will of God for his life, must shun conformation to the ideology of this world and undergo transformation of mind. This, says Paul is most reasonable.

2c. The world-view presented by the motion picture industry glorifies greed, pride and sex. The dedicated believer makes a radical departure from these and practices faithfulness, humility and holiness. He avoids the corruption and carnality communicated by the cinema not out of legalistic constraint but loving concern to please a holy God.

4b. Dedicated discernment:

Phil. 4:8, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

1c. The believer proves all things to discern what he can allow and disallow in his life (1 Thess. 5:22). He adheres to the good and avoids the bad.

2c. Even a cursory perusal of movie advertisements forces one to the conclusion that the content of the majority of Hollywood films are the antinomy of that which is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous or praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). The discerning and discriminating Christian rejects the vulgarity of Hollywood in favor of the virtue of holiness -- be it at the theater, on television or on video films.



5b. Effective evangelism:

Col. 4:5, "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time."

- 1c. Each believer is to be a witness to those "who are without." By becoming like the worldling he hinders rather than helps his testimony. A pure gospel is to be presented by a pure vessel in a pure environment.
- 2c. The cinema contaminates the Christian. Its environment endangers evangelism. Attendance of the theater destroys the barrier that a holy God demands of a humble Christian who would keep himself free from the world's pollution (Js. 1:17). A housewife serves meals on a clean plate. Similarly, the Savior would have us offer the bread of life through clean vessels.
- 3c. It has already been mentioned that at times the theater is used to present Christian motion pictures. Since nothing is more illustrative of the iniquity and immorality of this world system than the movie industry, the utilization of the theater by believers effectively destroys the distinction between the secular and the sacred, the cosmos and Christ, the satanic realm and the kingdom of Christ. The end does not justify the means. The Gospel must be presented by all means to all men -- as long as the means involve no carnal casuistic compromise.
- 6b. Financial faithfulness:
- 1 Cor. 4:2, "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful."
- 1c. While the believer on this earth is a steward of the time, treasures and talents the Lord has entrusted to him, unfortunately many saints live in callous disregard of this responsibility of stewardship. The Lord holds us responsible for His gifts and accountable for their use.
- 2c. The frequenting of the theater involves direct financial support of an industry that has effectively destroyed the morals of America. Is it faithful stewardship to take even a small amount of the funds the Lord has entrusted to us as His stewards and so to help underwrite an industry that undermines everything the believer holds dear?
- 7b. Guileless godliness:
- 1 John 2:28-29, "And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.
- If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him."

- 1c. Worldliness and godliness are incompatible. Spiritually-minded saints abide in Christ and avoid everything that would bring sorrow to the Savior now and shame to the saint at the coming of Christ.
- 2c. The watching of questionable materials, be it theater films, videos or television programs, dulls the appetite for spiritual things and makes it impossible to "bring every thought into captivity of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).
- 3c. The argument is sometimes heard that as long as an individual is selective in the motion pictures he views, he can frequent the theater without being guilty of compromise. This ignores, our responsibility to our weaker brethren. Our liberty, says Paul, may cause our weaker brother to stumble (1 Cor. 8:9). While we are selective, others witnessing our frequenting the cinema will not be equally discriminating.
- 4c. One final matter needs to be considered in relation to godliness. Young people need role models of other than Hollywood stars. It is tragic to be in Christian homes and observe the posters decorating the rooms of young people. Julie Andrews, who captured the heart of millions with her leading role in "The Sound of Music" committed adultery with her producer and appeared semi-nude in a subsequent film. Musicians and movie stars do not lend themselves to being cynosures for Christians. May our conduct be consistent with our confessions. A genuine concern for godliness will attract people to us and ultimately to God.



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MOVIEGUIDE

A Biblical Guide to Movies and Entertainment

"To commend those who do right." (1 Peter 2:14) and "To expose the fruitless deeds of darkness." (Ephesians 5:11)
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