

Among the most dangerous resorts for pleasure is the theater.... Low songs, lewd gestures, expressions, and attitudes, deprave the imagination and debase the morals.... There is no influence in our land more powerful to poison the imagination, to destroy religious impressions, and to blunt the relish for the tranquil pleasures and sober realities of life than theatrical amusements.¹

When Ellen White penned these words in 1881, conservative Christian ministers and teachers emphasized the moral dangers of "theatrical amusements"

Adventists & Movies

A Century of Change

by
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like opera, the circus, and vaudeville. While operas appealed to the American rich, the lower and middle classes preferred the cheaper thrills of the circus or the comedy, music, juggling, and dance routines of vaudeville.²

With the invention of silent films in the 1890s, theaters replaced vaudeville halls. Seventh-day Adventist attention soon shifted from Ellen White's focus on the moral dangers of the *medium* ("theatrical amusements") and its *methods* ("low songs, lewd gestures, expressions, and attitudes") to the evil nature of the *place* (theaters). By the 1910s, Adventist

academy bulletins included theaters with saloons and billiard and dance halls as forbidden "allurements."³

Like the Maginot Line between France and Germany, Adventists in the 1920s drew a do-not-go line around movie theaters. As the Germans out-maneuvered the Maginot line, however, Adventist youth attending our schools found ways to bring plug-in "theatrical amusements" into their dorms. Soon school bulletins banned every electronic device that came on the market: radios (1920s), phonographs (1930s), television sets (1950s), tape recorders (1970s), Walkmans and CD players (1980s).⁴

While church leaders in the 1930s and '40s focused on theaters as bad places, a new technology arose destined to bring movies into the home. Demonstrated in 1939 at the New York World's Fair, TV hit the market in 1946. Advertized as "family theatre television," it soon dominated the family room, rearranging the furniture and replacing the piano and hearth. By 1950, 9 percent of American homes had a TV set; by 1955, 65 percent had one.⁵

How did Adventists respond to television? In the late 1940s, they did not see its potential for bringing the theater into their homes. They had for so long focused on the theater as a bad place *outside* the home that they believed the Adventist family was secure behind the walls of home, church, and school. Post-war *Review and Herald* writers assumed that the average Adventist family ate, read, worshiped, and recreated together "in mutual love, friendship, and spiritual unity," shunning the theater as "no place for him who would bring into captivity 'every thought.'" Editor F. D. Nichol asked pastors to have youth sign pledge cards to boycott the "devil's temples." But *The Youth's Instructor* ignored TV, focusing instead on theaters whose "sex and seduction," violence, and "vulgar, witless" movies glamorized evil and compromised spiritual values.⁶

Only D. A. Delafield linked theater movies and television in 1949 as twin dangers to the home, attacking TV for turning American families into "chairbound, myopic, speechless" individuals. If Adventists bought TV sets, they might compromise their standards. "Satan will use television," he declared, "to

influence the world for evil."⁷ One evil he saw was the psychological harm of watching violent movies. "What right do we have to bring the theater...into our homes?" he asked.⁸

But during the 1950s, some American Adventists *did* buy televisions, rationalizing that TV was better than going to theater movies because they could control it. So Delafield urged families to pray before buying and watching TV, lest this "projection of Hollywood and Broadway [bring] its atmosphere of hilarity and sin into the...home." He felt Adventists should be too busy attending prayer meeting, giving Bible studies, and distributing publications to see any but the *best* programs.⁹

By 1952, some church leaders knew this was not true. Archa Dart wrote of youth "hooked" on TV movies with diminishing interest in school, M.V. books, and church activities. Many writers expressed concern at the content of TV movies: profane language, crime and violence, and the addicting nature of the medium. Could electronic violence create juvenile delinquents? Others emphasized the physical effects of watching television: weak eyesight, flabby muscles, overeating, fighting over which movies to see. A few worried about its spiritual impact: by causing families to skip worships, prayer and youth meetings, was it undoing the work of the Sabbath school and church school?

Those who thought so generated many prescriptions for controlling TV. Some quoted biblical principles: Philippians 4:8 ("Whatsoever things are true..."), Colossians 3:2 ("Set your affections on things above"), 1 Corinthians 10:31 ("Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God"), and Psalm 101:3 ("I will set nothing wicked before my eyes"). Others suggested watching only movies that did not break any of the 10 Commandments.¹⁰

By the mid-1950s, however, many writers admitted that TV had already changed the Adventist home.¹¹ Sabbath school quarterlies, Bibles, and books collected dust as families watched five hours of TV daily. "Are we bartering our spiritual vision for television?" W. J. Harris asked. D. A. Delafield thought so, adding that "tele-violence" and movie make-believe worlds created split personalities in children. Queried F. D. Nichol, "We condemn the theater. Shall

we commend its most active competitor?"¹²

By the end of the decade, most Adventist writers admitted that control over this "theater in the home" was slipping.¹³ A New Jersey housewife confessed, "Any intelligent person should be able to control [TV]. But it seems to control you after awhile." Why? TV deadens parents' judgment, Theodore Carcich said: its violence, silliness, and innuendoes make them more tolerant of immorality, disobedience, and dishonesty. "If you cannot control it," he warned, "it would be better to get rid of your set than to lose your soul." Editor Kenneth Wood saw both TV movies and theater attendance as "a symptom of spiritual illness." Delafield agreed, bemoaning "[the] sad fact today that many ... Seventh-day Adventists have permitted the little TV magic box to become a coffin in which they have buried the remains of their Christian experience."¹⁴

Despite the proven evangelistic success of Adventist TV programs such as "Faith for Today" and "It Is Written," nearly everyone writing for church periodicals in the 1960s stressed TV's harmful effects on the family. Some, skeptical that any family could control their viewing, felt that TV had become a *worse* threat than the theater. Increasingly aware of its physical, mental, and psychological impact, authors branded TV as a beloved robber, a one-eyed monster, a Pandora's box, a habit-forming drug, and a

deadly dose of poison. Stunned at the spiritual compromises it had wrought in their homes, even laymen and women wrote of television as a tempter, "the Devil's master stroke."

Also in the 1960s, the traditional do-not-go line between theater and TV dissolved: after a decade of TV, Adventists confessed that one could be as detrimental as the other. Nobody attended the cinema six hours a day, but many watched TV that much. Some writers suggested that the Holy Spirit left the person who watched bad movies, even in their homes. Others felt that watching violent "Westerns," murder mysteries, and crime programs jeopardized one's eternal salvation. Ministers declared that "the-god-of-living-rooms" had replaced family worship in 56 percent of Adventist homes, while 52 percent of Adventist youth never studied their Bibles.¹⁵

With TVs in 83 percent of U.S. homes by 1962, Donald McKay believed TV had become Satan's tool to alter lifestyles and thought. *Adventist Review* and *Youth's Instructor* articles advised families to trash their sets and recapture "the old-fashioned feeling of togetherness, and a healthier family life."¹⁶

This awareness that traditional Adventist values had been altered pervaded the articles of the 1970s.¹⁷ TV on trial: *Insight* accused it of being a "sorcerer," a "drug," a "mental ghetto," a secular god that had "raped" teenagers' minds; its violent, sex-laden movies *did* harm viewers. Evidence of mind-conditioning, obesity, emotional stress, cardio-vascular disease, and premature cynicism in teens mounted from hundreds of scientific reports.

Adventist authors felt TV had destroyed the spiritual life of the home; they urged parents to save their families from its evil influence by getting rid of the sets, for "temperance in TV is abstinence." A few warned, "It is extremely likely that when the Lord opens the books at judgment day millions will realize...that this insidious little box single-handedly will have snatched more people out of God's presence than has any other device Satan



"Tonight we'll watch a video on the problem of teens watching too much television."

10 Principles for Those Who Care

1. "Set your affections on things above"—Colossians 3:2.
2. "Whatsoever things are true..., honest..., just..., pure..., lovely..., of good report..., think on these things"—Philippians 4:8.
3. "By beholding, we become changed"—Ellen White, *Messages to Young People*, p. 282.
4. "Keep out of the home every influence...not productive of good"—Ellen White, *Adventist Home*, p. 411.
5. "I know for myself that I am a stronger, happier, more creative Christian without television"—Madlyn Hamblin, *Adventist Review*, 11 June 1981, pp. 536-537.
6. "[Movies create] an artificial environment that directly desensitizes us to the exceeding sinfulness of sin"—Daniel Sheehy, *Adventist Review*, 28 October 1982, pp. 1023-1025.
7. "Don't go to movies dumber than you are"—Roger Ebert, movie critic (1986).
8. "I will set nothing wicked before my eyes"—Psalm 101:3.
9. "Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things. And revive me in your way"—Psalm 119:37.
10. "When we get the first glimpse of Jesus coming in the clouds of heaven, there will be no regret for all the movies we've missed"—Wellesley Muir, *Pacific Union Recorder*, 1 June 1992, p. 13.

has been able to come up with in his 6,000 years of warfare."¹⁸ Activists suggested writing protest letters to the networks and sponsors.

But *Insight* felt the time had come for Adventist youth to develop their *own* philosophy of entertainment, since Jerry and Jane Thayer's 1975 survey showed that 48 percent of U.S. Adventist college youth attended the cinema and 69 percent watched TV movies regularly. So *Insight* writers used creative techniques like "talking" TVs to examine such issues as electronic hypnotism and mind control, fantasy and escapism, and how camera tricks distort reality.¹⁹

Most Adventist writers in the 1980s wrote jeremiads of despair.²⁰ "The [Adventist] home is in big trouble!" cried *Adventist Review* editor Kenneth Wood.²¹ Parents, feeling guilty for defending a double standard for a whole generation (theater is bad, TV is OK), admitted it was their fault youth were addicted to TV, HBO, and VCR movies, which, though less violent (in the U.S.) after 1978, were more sexually explicit. Many felt the church needed to teach children ethical values once again, for TV—now in 92 percent of Adventist homes—had shaped even their understanding of the Bible.

Openly admitting addiction to TV, authors took a hard look not only at its messages but also at the medium itself. Australian graphics designer Daniel Sheehy stated that film techniques distort reality, overload the nervous system, deaden the critical faculties, and force subliminal acceptance of actors' values (51 percent of whom condoned adultery, 80 percent favored homosexuality, and 97 percent were pro-abortion, one study showed). Movies put the viewer in a trance-like state, overload the brain with visual stimuli, bury their images directly into the subconscious, and induce alpha brain waves similar to the mind in a state of sleep.²² Soon, according to *Insight's* 1986 "Special Entertainment" issue, state of the art technology (computer graphic generation, brain mapping, holographies) will make fantasy into the "ultimate

reality." "Our thinking processes," Gerry Mander warned, "can't save us" from corrupting movies, because "the images pass right through anyway. They enter our brains. They remain *permanently*.... Imagination and reality have merged. We have lost control of our images. We have lost control of our minds."²³

By the late 1980s, many U.S. Adventists, now watching TV seven hours a day, communicated with their families only 14 minutes a day. *Insight* editor Chris Blake, recognizing that heavy day-time viewers included women hooked on soap operas, castigated "dirty soaps" for their emphasis on fear, adultery, rape, violence, and emotionalism. "Soap operas," he concluded, "are as bad as X-rated movies," for they inject our systems with emotional poisons and distort reality.²⁴

As VCRs became popular, some Adventist couples even rented soft porn videos to improve their sex life. Studies show, however, that *not* watching TV or movies for a month or more dramatically *improves* one's love life. Cinematic sexual relationships are sensationalized far beyond what real life people can duplicate; trying to match celluloid sex leads to divorce, marriage counselors say.

While Adventist writers in the 1990s still attack TV and video, and cinema movies as hazardous to moral, mental, and physical health, they also suggest creative options to passive addiction. Lonnie Melashenko and Tim Crosby's *The Television Time-Bomb* offers 38 "Things to Do Instead of Watching TV." Their creative list includes playing games, reading books, exercising, painting, baking bread, talking to one's spouse, doing a good deed, gardening, cleaning house—and, if all else fails, getting some sleep! Joe Wheeler, in *Remote Controlled*, adds family dinner discussions, listening to music, visiting art galleries, studying nature, learning a language, raising pets, writing letters, and having family worship. Ironically, these are the very activities families enjoyed 50 years ago *before* television!²⁵

Could Seventh-day Adventists dispense with the "boob tube," break their dependence on video and theater movies, and return to the 1940s ideal when the family played, prayed, and stayed together? Studies show that some gladly would! A 1980 *Insight* reader survey

indicated that 40 percent of youth felt they could adjust if they lost their TVs; 10 percent admitted "it would be a blessing." In a 1982 survey of Columbia Union College and Central California Conference youth, 60 percent called television "a waste of time," 14 percent found it boring, while 19 percent felt it was harmful. Moreover, 44 percent said that, when they became parents, *their* children would see much *less* TV than they themselves had watched. A surprising 23 percent resolved their future homes would have no television at all!²⁶

A century after Ellen White penned the words quoted at the beginning of our article, Adventists had come to recognize by experience the debasing influence of "theatrical amusements," for by beholding their TVs, video, and cinema movies, they had indeed become changed, perhaps forever. □

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