

HOW TO GET BETTER FILMS



OUR SUNDAY VISITOR PRESS

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Can Catholics Really
Reform the Movies?



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HOW TO GET BETTER FILMS*

Is not the Catholic Hierarchy of the United States grappling with a problem almost too huge when it undertakes to reform the movies? Are the Bishops really hopeful of success?

While I fear that such questions will spontaneously arise in the minds of many Catholics, whose ecclesiastical leaders are pressing them to register effective disapproval of the demoralizing films now so universally exhibited, success should not be one-half as difficult as it might, at first blush, appear.

Although the ratio of Catholics to the total population of the United States is only one to five, the ratio is one to three, or even one to two in most of the large cities east of the Mississippi, where the big theatres ex-

* A reprint from an article written by Most Rev. John F. Noll, for the American Ecclesiastical Review, April, 1934.

ist and where, therefore, box office receipts are heaviest. It is true that in many sections of our country the Catholic voice would be "a voice crying in the wilderness", but not so in the cities and towns where three-fourths of the Catholics of the United States live. Only one-fourth of our people dwell on farms and in villages. These figures should be reversed in relation to Protestantism. Its adherents are three-fourths rural and only one-fourth urban.

Let us particularize: the city of Chicago is one-half Catholic. Do you mean to say that Hollywood would not be greatly disturbed if suddenly the managers of Chicago theatres reported that attendance at the movies was being cut fifty per cent, and that with the consequent drastic reduction in ticket sales, with no lessening of operating costs, the show-houses could not continue to function? Success would be comparatively easy if all Catholics would only rally round their spiritual leaders. The Catholics of Cincinnati, Cleve-

land, Detroit, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Newark, Providence, New York, Brooklyn, Hartford, Boston, if they responded almost unanimously and simultaneously, could force a speedy house-cleaning in moviedom.

Will Catholics Cooperate?

With this theory all will agree, but can we actually procure anything like unanimous and simultaneous response to the call of our prelates? Can we count even on the majority? The writer thinks so if on a designated Sunday the appeal to our people be made in every pulpit in the land, if pledges be secured by the united parish societies.

Why not designate a Sunday for nation-wide sermons on "The Dangers of the Day" of which the cinema, as now constituted, is chief?

We must lay aside, therefore our inferiority complex, and decide that we can accomplish this job, as we could accomplish many another with effort more intensive and concentrated.



Then, is it not foolish to suppose that Protestants would not join us in large numbers in our crusade to improve the character of the films?

There exists a Federal Motion Picture Council in America, Inc., whose slogan is "mobilize for wholesome motion pictures". This Council is constituted almost entirely of non-Catholics, and as General Secretary, the Reverend William Scheafe Chase, is soliciting Catholic cooperation for the passage of the Patman Bill designated to secure Federal supervision of motion pictures "at the source of production, before they are filmed, and for the prohibition of blind and block booking".

So much did Bishop Cantwell's article which appeared in the AMERICAN ECCLESIASTICAL REVIEW for February appeal to this Federal Council that it had the same reprinted and circulated widely. This Organization claims it has the support of the Protestant Episcopal General Convention, of the Baptist Northern Convention, of the General Assembly

of the Presbyterian Church, of the National Grange, and various other organizations. So anxious is it to win Catholic support for the cleaning of the stage that it suggests that the Patman Bill might be amended to satisfy us.

Mrs. August Belmont, President of the Motion Picture Research Council, has announced that her organization will campaign for more wholesome pictures, and wage a fight against the continuance of block-booking, which prevents managers of local show-houses from exhibiting pictures of their own and their patrons' choice.

Why should Protestants not be equally interested with Catholics in elevating the standards of motion pictures? Why should not all people be equally interested? Only the adversaries of Christian morality intent on demoralizing youth, could be on the other side.

The movie could be the greatest educational instrumentality in the world. It could be the most effective

promoter of morality, the most powerful guide of youth along the lines of rectitude, the greatest influence for national unity, for the improvement of our social life—all this because the whole country patronizes the movie and frequently, while only a small proportion is under other direct influence designed to promote religion and morality.

The Bishops' Programs

Within the writer's own diocese Protestants of several cities have set Catholics an example by securing from their people pledges to remain away from the theatre until it desists from serving filth. During Lent, 1934, thousands of Catholic women in his diocese engaged in a house to house canvass to procure such pledges, and 60,000 cards were signed as evidence of serious cooperation with the Bishop's program.

Raymond R. Cameron is the Executive Secretary of a newly formed Detroit Council of Catholic Organizations which is composed of all local

societies for the purpose of building a united front for Catholic Action. The affiliated societies, and they number thirty, have a combined membership of 400,000, are ready to join in this crusade.

The Bishop of Monterey-Fresno recently wrote to the manager of every theatre in his diocese, urging him to assist in making his own theatre a place of cultural and wholesome recreation, and assuring him that Catholics will be encouraged to patronize the same if he does, while they will withhold such patronage if he does not. He reminded the theatre managers that the campaign was not directed against them personally, or against their place of business, but against the producers, who have not given them free choice in the selection of their films. It is also reported that the results of this letter of the Bishop have been most gratifying.

The Bishop of Fall River prepared a Lenten pastoral on the movies which was read from every pulpit in his diocese. He suggested that all

Catholics subscribe to a "NIM" Code ("No Immoral Movies"), whose symbol will be a white dove, and whose slogan will be the same as the NRA, — "*We do our part*".

The Archbishop of Cincinnati ordered the pastors of his Archdiocese each to preach a strong sermon on one Sunday during Lent, at all the Masses, on the motion picture evil as it exists today, and on the moral wrong committed by Catholics who patronize many productions. He asked that a committee be appointed in each parish to keep a watchful eye on advance advertising of movies to be shown within the parish area, and to inform the pastor. He requested the cooperation of the National Council of Catholic Women, the Holy Name Society, Parent-Teachers' Association, the National Council of Catholic Men, the Knights of Columbus, Knights of St. John, Catholic Order of Foresters, and all other societies of the archdiocese. He asked the teachers of schools to carry the campaign to the children.

The Bishop of Albany has completed a most effective diocesan organization for the combating of the stage and film evil. He has a Diocesan Committee, an every Parish Committee, a combination committee of all the parishes of any town or city, also a special "Press and Publicity Committee". He, too, is carrying the campaign to the school children who are encouraged to wear a button inscribed "C. S." (Clean Shows).

The Ordinaries of Boston, New York, Cleveland and practically every other diocese, are active in the same direction with a program similar to one of the above, and if every diocesan will cooperate for its execution, a victory for God, souls, morality, country, will be achieved.

A Monopoly in Europe

But American-made motion pictures are shown not only in the United States. They have almost monopolized the trade throughout Europe, where a crusade is now forming

against them, promoted not by the Catholic Hierarchy, but by leading secular newspapers, whose efforts the Catholic Bishops of all European nations will surely encourage and bless.

In the LONDON TIMES (secular) date of January 25th, 1934, there appeared an article commendatory of the improvement which has taken place during the past year in British-produced films. In this article the writer makes the point:

“Once more the British studios showed that their technicians had caught up with the best of their foreign rivals.

“The response of the Empire markets has been swift and substantial. Australia is demanding more and more films from this country. She is the best oversea customer for British films and already a notable financial factor. Canadian enthusiasm comes only second to this. By every post comes letters from cinema-goers and exhibitors in the Dominions, which read something like this: ‘Give us more and more British films. We are tired to death of the sex and gangster

American pictures. Go on keeping your films clean'."

The writer continues:

"Hollywood's actresses belong to a grotesque and isolated world, where the incredible is the commonplace, and where the inhabitants prostrate themselves eight times a day before the great god publicity. We have no Mae West, but if we did possess one it would be profitless to exploit her."

In an editorial in the same number of the LONDON TIMES under the caption BRITISH FILMS appeared the following paragraph:

"All who take the films seriously will hope that British-made films will have the future which is forecast for them in an article printed in this issue. The writer believes that they are about to burst forth in triumph from the gloom which like a fog has hung over them for years, and he prophesies that 'the film which apes Hollywood will fail'. That is good news, in keeping with the appreciative reception given this week-end to CATHERINE THE GREAT in Paris. That British films should be forever unable to come up to, or surpass the American was not to be believed ex-

cept by those who take a very short view of things. If our Correspondent is right, the tide turns at an appropriate moment. There are many signs that the public has put up long enough with undiluted Hollywood."

Protests equally strong against Hollywood productions have been raised in Austria—yes, and even in India and Egypt.

In an article appearing recently in THE SATURDAY EVENING POST the author pointed out how the Hollywood producers take note of the different attitude of theatrical patrons in various sections of the country. Commenting on this cleverness of Hollywood the editor of the AVE MARIA remarks:

"THE SATURDAY EVENING POST notes for us the positive comparative and superlative degrees of indecency observed when Hollywood makes pictures. In the *first* filming of a certain play, the lady (of the picture) visits the hero (of the picture) in his apartments. She is scantily and suggestively dressed. This showing was for the American public. The *second*

'taking' presents the same visiting lady with more, but not so much more, clothing. This release was for Ohio, Pennsylvania and such States as prefer a less negative nudity. In *version three* the heroine appears before the hero dressed decorously and seated modestly, as is the custom among civilized peoples. This 'showing' was for England and Ireland. The producers are not very complimentary to their native country. They think so little of fellow Americans they feed them raw pictures. They seem to incline to the belief that Americans are cannibals esthetically. They want woman flesh. And Hollywood, which always gives what it thinks people want, furnishes the flesh. Self-respect calls for an American protest expressed as action."

The recently published report of the Department of the Interior, incorporating the result of a survey of the movies conducted at the expense of the Payne Fund, contains a terrible indictment of the movies. It declares that *three out of every four* pictures deal with crime, sex, and unwholesome romance; that practically all the children of the United States attend the movies once a week and that

they decidedly change the child's attitudes. Are these changed attitudes to prevail in the next generation? If they are, then American morals will be far below the level of those of ancient Greece and Rome, to which the destruction of their civilization is universally credited.

The Producers' Promise

We have learned the lesson that no faith can be placed in the promises of Motion Picture producers. They signed a Code which would have been quite satisfactory to the Catholic Bishops. In fact, it had the endorsement of Cardinal Hayes before it was adopted, but there seems to have been no serious intention on the part of the film producers to observe it—because its violation was almost immediate.

In an address delivered at the Convention dinner of the Diocese of Central New York, Syracuse, in May, 1931, the Reverend Clifford Gray Twombly, Rector of St. James' Episcopal Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, quoted Mr. William H. Hays, as of March 31st, 1931, saying:

“The adoption of the Code marks the latest and greatest step taken by the motion picture industry in the direction of self-government, to the end that the entertainment, educational and informative value of the theatrical screen shall conform not only to the best standards of this art, but to the wholesome instincts of life.”

The Violation of the Promise

Then Mr. Twombly appeals to the record following the promulgation of Hays' statement and notes that of approximately 228 feature films released and reviewed during this time,

“41 have been films of gangsters, racketeers, bandits, blackmailers, crooks and gamblers,

“27 have been films of prostitutes and mistresses,

“65 have been films of illicit relations, marital infidelities, dishonorable proposals, suggestive talk and all kinds of immoral situations, many of them rankly so! and

“3 have been films in which the heroine gave up her virtue to ‘save’ another!”

Are Catholics, then, to remain

away from the talkies until the Hollywood and other producers effect the reforms desired? Not at all, but they are expected to discriminate. If one-fourth of the movies do not offend against what is right morally and socially, this would mean that there would be an average of one or two shows a week which they might patronize.

We have an opportunity to test the frequently quoted utterance of the late Cardinal Gibbons that "where Bishops, priests, and laity work together for a common cause their efforts cannot fail".

No other common cause has ever been so worthy of our support as is this cause of clean movies. To no other single influence are *all our people* so subject as to the movie—for better or worse. As at present organized, operated and controlled the Motion Picture industry is the most potent agency of harm, the most covert destroyer of faith, the most daring assaulter of morality. For the sake of God and country, of Christ

and His little ones, of religion and morality generally, the movie *must be reformed*. It is within our power to accomplish the task and should it not be equally our highest ambition?

* * *

THE MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY

By the Most Reverend John J. Cantwell,
D. D., Bishop of Los Angeles
and San Diego

Previous to the advent of the present widespread industrial depression the figures for the paid attendance at motion picture theatres *in the United States* were in excess of *100 million a week*. Even now, with more than 9 millions of Americans said to be unemployed, with suffering and poverty and hunger widespread throughout the land, the attendance figures hover close to *70 million a week*. It is estimated that *world attendance* upon American-made motion pictures at the present time is close to *250 million a week*. The average price of admission throughout the world is about 14 cents—the average price in the United States is about 19 cents.

American producers of motion pic-

tures produce each year more than 84 per cent of the world's product.

Ninety per cent of all motion pictures made in the United States are made by *eight producing companies* with production headquarters in *Hollywood*. These eight companies, and a number of smaller units, are members of the "Hays' Association," so-called—*the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc.*, whose president is Will H. Hays, former Postmaster-General of the United States, with offices in New York City, at 28 West 44th Street, and in Hollywood, at 5504 Hollywood Boulevard. A California corporation known as the *Association of Motion Picture Producers, Inc.*, whose president is Louis B. Mayer (Vice-president of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corporation), is a subsidiary corporation of the Hays association in New York. All the members of the Hollywood corporation are members of the *Association in New York*. The Hollywood Association operates as a separate corporate entity but is dominated and controlled by the organization in New York.

The eight larger companies in Hollywood, which produce 90 per cent of all the pictures made in the United

States, are the following: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corporation; Fox Film Corporation; Paramount Productions, Inc.; R. K. O. Pictures, Inc.; Warner Bros.—First National Picture Corporation; Universal Pictures Corporation; Columbia Pictures Corporation; and the United Artists Studio Corporation. This last named Corporation is made up of a number of smaller production units, among which are Twentieth Century Pictures, Inc. (only recently organized); Samuel Goldwyn, Ltd., Inc.; Caddo Corporation; Edward Small; Douglas Fairbanks Corporation; the Mary Pickford Corporation; and Charles Chaplain, Inc.

About 480 *feature-length* talking motion pictures are made each year in the United States. Ninety-six per cent of these are made in Hollywood. In addition, the companies which are members of the Hays' Association produce 2,500 "shorts" each year—pictures of one and two reels made as entertainment pictures (not commercial or educational pictures) for exhibition in theatres.

In the production of these entertainment talking pictures about 100 million dollars is expended annually. Another hundred million dollars is

expended each year in advertising these pictures, *chiefly in newspapers*, and a third 100 million is spent in selling and distributing the pictures to the theatres.

At the present time there are in the United States more than 16,000 motion picture theatres equipped for the projection of sound, or synchronized, motion pictures. Of this number more than 3,000 are closed at present, due to the widespread industrial depression.

In addition to the commercial advantages which it was hoped to be gained by native production of pictures, a number of the foreign countries opposed the exhibition of American-made motion pictures on the ground that these were *subversive of decency and public morality*. In almost every country in the world a strict governmental censorship of motion pictures is maintained and many American pictures are rejected by these Censors and not licensed for exhibition on the grounds that these "are not suited for public exhibition."

Previous to the coming of the talking picture, the American-made motion picture sinned chiefly because of its vulgarity.

With the coming of the talking picture has come greater and more far-reaching influence. The pictures now impress their patrons not only by sight but with animated sound as well. The talking picture broadened the field of the movies and opened up new channels of art and drama. Screen plays, lifted almost bodily from the fast-degenerating Broadway stage, were made into movies over night, with the result that the cinema has now become the instrument for the telling of tales the like of which used to be confined, a few years back, to the sophisticated stage—or the barnyard.

The difficulty with the talking pictures as we now have them is that they may have taken to preaching a philosophy of life which, in most instances, is definitely the wrong philosophy, sinister and insidious. The most competent authority in Hollywood today is responsible for the statement that many of the talking pictures made out there “teach the philosophy that marriage, the purity of women and the sanctity of the home are outmoded sentimentalities,” unworthy of serious consideration at the hands of “intelligent” Americans.

The stories upon which most of the

present-day movies are built concern themselves with a *discussion of social problems*. The movies now discuss morals, divorce, free love, race suicide, unborn children, sexual relationships outside marriage, and "double standards," the relationship of sex to religion, marriage and its effect "upon the freedom of women"—these and a dozen other kindred subjects have been injected into the talking picture. There is no need to argue the effect of all these upon the public who witness them.

An examination of a number of the motion pictures recently released for public exhibition suggests that the entire motion picture industry has set itself to the task of seeing which company can produce the most vicious film. In great numbers of these recently exhibited pictures there is a definite attempt to create audience sympathy for the violation of the moral law. The subject matter of most of these offensive films deals with sex relations of every conceivable kind. Sin is condoned, false moral values are instilled in young and critical minds, and thus is lowered both the public and the private standards of conduct of all who see them. When the pictures are not vile *in toto*—the subject matter—presentation—

photography—dialogue—action—the films are crowded with salacious details—smutty talk, obscene wit, offensive situations.

If one were to glean one's knowledge of family life in America from the American screen presentations, one would, unerringly, come to believe that adultery is but a slight adventure in romance that any understanding wife should easily forgive. It goes without saying that a number of the films attempt to *justify* adultery while sexual irregularities are played up with enthusiasm and made to appear as acceptable and defensible.

A number of pictures selected at random from recent releases measure up something like this: *One* is based upon seduction, rape and prostitution; *two* had a foreign—South Sea Isle—locale and offended by a plot embracing aphrodisiac drugs, rape and revenge; the *third*, also a picture with a foreign locale, was based upon a romance of native toxicology and nudity; a *fourth* is the story of a nudist colony which, so far, a number of the political censor boards have refused to license for public exhibition; a *fifth* was a vile and revolting story of a mother who became a prostitute in order to provide luxury and

education for her son; a *sixth* deals with an alleged cultural social worker who makes it a practice to bear children to men she never sees afterwards, the while the "cultured" lady attains to great distinction in the field of social welfare and betterment; the *seventh* contributed a new study to the unhappy small-town girl made happy by the gay adventurer from the city—she giving him her body "on call"; the *eighth* was concerned with the lechery of a fanatic monk and his two attempts at rape; the *ninth* was a rowdy farce with Boccaccian dialogue; in the *tenth* adultery was justified, or, at least, conveniently forgotten in a discussion which sought to show that a man's mistress can be his wife more truly "in the sight of God" than the woman he married.

Not *all* talking motion pictures made in the United States are based upon gross sexual irregularities. Probably one-fourth of them are entitled to be so classified. Many of the pictures are based upon details which may well incite to crime. Some of them make a point of glorifying not only the harlot but her gangster "boy-friend" as well. But, for all practical purposes, it may be well sustained that *twenty-five per cent* of

all pictures made in Hollywood in the course of a year are definitely bad and offensive.

Now, it may be asked, who is responsible for all this vileness and worse, that is being made to serve as the instrument of debauchery of the youth of the land? The Jews? Yes—and no. Most of the producing-distributing-exhibiting companies are operated and managed, when they are not actually owned, by Jews. The only one of the *big eight* of the companies mentioned in the early pages of this discussion which is definitely free from Jewish influence in its management and direction is the Fox Company. All the other big companies are managed by Jews. Jewish executives are the responsible men in 90% of all the Hollywood Studios, and it is these Jewish executives who have the final word on all scenarios before production is actually launched. Certain it is that if these Jewish executives had any desire to keep the screen free from offensiveness they could do so.

Back of the Jewish executives, however, stands a group of men and women, all of them classified as “artists”, who are creators of this new school of vice. The actors, as

such, have little influence on the character of the stories that are placed upon the screen. Players are not actually consulted regarding the moral values, or lack of them, which a type, or character, which they may be called upon to play, suggests. Along with the director of the picture, the writer is the person who creates all the filth of the picture and it is the writer who is most responsible, next to the managing executives of the Studios. With the coming of the talkies there went to Hollywood hundreds of playwrights from the Broadway stage, authors of vaudeville *skits* and *acts* and *playlets*. Along with these went the authors of current "literary" successes—the writers of the pornographic school whose books have had a great sale in recent years. It is from these men and women that the stories now current on the screen are selected. *Seventy-five per cent of these authors are pagans.* They are men and women who care nothing for decency, good taste or refinement. Most of them are living lives of infidelity and worse, wherein there is to be found not a suggestion of respect for religion or for spiritual values.

Someone has taken occasion to say recently that "all the worth-while literary talent in the world" hovers near

to Hollywood. In large measure this is true if by literary talent you mean those men and women whose works appear to have a popular appeal. And if this be true, then one cannot help but observe that the world of literature today is in a bad way. If this be literature, then write it down that we are in the midst of an almost universal era of cynicism, obscenity and destructive criticism. Our writers for the screen spend much of their talents in glorifying the female libertine and the public prostitute, and as panderers of this sort, our motion picture producers have welcomed them, shifting the blame to the public with the excuse that the public wants that sort of stuff and will have no other.

It is true in a measure that this sort of stuff seems to be the kind of stuff which American audiences want, but what a sad commentary all this is on our literary achievements! After a hundred and fifty years of our boasted *education*, free and untrammelled, our people care for nothing higher than the vaporings of the pig-sty!

In any discussion having to do with moral values in motion picture entertainment it is the practice with many

of the producing people in Hollywood to point to the box-office success of pictures which, to many patrons, are definitely offensive. As a matter of fact, the records indicate that few pictures attain to any outstanding success that are vile, suggestive, or unclean. True, a great number of indecent pictures have some *fair* measure of success just as certain popular novels of the present day seem to attain to some success if they are, what Bill Nye used to designate as "spicy." But as with novels, so with screen plays: The great outstanding successes are as clean as a hound's tooth. The most popular screen players today are those popularly identified with clean, wholesome entertainment (Janet Gaynor, Marie Dressler, Will Rogers, et. al.)

PLEDGE OF THE LEGION OF DECENCY

I wish to join the Legion of Decency, which condemns vile and unwholesome moving pictures. I unite with all who protest against them as a grave menace to youth, to home life, to country and to religion.

I condemn absolutely those debauching motion pictures which, with other degrading agencies, are corrupting public morals and promoting a sex mania in our land.

I shall do all that I can to arouse public opinion against the portrayal of vice as a normal condition of affairs, and against respecting criminals of any class as heroes or heroines, presenting their filthy philosophy of life as something acceptable to decent men and women.

I regret that so many of our daily newspapers seem to have lost all sense

of shame in advertising and reviewing these unspeakable productions.

Considering these evils, I hereby promise to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality. I promise further to secure as many members as possible for the Legion of Decency.

I make this protest in a spirit of self-respect, and with the conviction that the American public does not demand filthy pictures.

Name _____

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