

DESCRIBING THE STORM

CHAPTER FIVE

No survey of the new framework of thought would be complete without at least some consideration of the Theater and the Cinema. We therefore take up both of these briefly in this lesson.

The Theater

In an important essay a few years ago Time Magazine had this to say about modern dramatists such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, and Osborne.

“None are alike; yet all raise a hemlock toast to the 20th century...In their plays, the situation of man is horrible and funny at the same time...These playwrights begin with one major premise—the absence of God. Their despair and their task are to fashion a post-Christian ethic—to find a meaning for life without supernatural sanction. Man as they see him, is a creature trapped between two voids, prenatal and posthumous, on a shrinking spit of sand he calls time.”

Or, in other words, the universe is just a gigantic “fluke.” Man himself is a result of chance. There is no meaning, and there is no purpose or destiny. Life is absurd because man is trapped in this “void.”

How do the playwrights show this? They do it in a number of ways. For example, in Eugene Ionesco’s play, *The Bald Soprano*, the clock strikes 17 in the first act of the play. In this play, too, the beginning and the ending are identical scenes. So the idea on the one hand is that anything can happen (the clock striking 17), while on the other hand there is no progress (the identical scenes). History is not viewed as a line of development to a goal (as it always has been in biblical thought) but as a recurrent cycle (as in non-Christian religions). In Harold Pinter’s play, *The Birthday Party*, two agents come to a rooming house. They rough up one of the lodgers and then take him “for a ride.” But why? The answer is not given because the playwright knows that violence is more terrible when it happens without reason. So, in his play no victim knows his hour, no executioner the source of his orders. Blind fate moves the figures, and they cannot evade or even contact the unseen powers that determine their fate. In John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter hurls a newspaper to the floor and says: “Why do I do this every Sunday? Even the book reviews seem to be the same as last week’s. Different books—same reviews.” In this way Osborne communicates man’s sense of aloneness in the universe—as a kind of island separated from all others—with the ultimate unmeaning, death, lying ahead. So the method varies. But the aim of all these playwrights is (to quote *Time*) “not to convey actions, messages or answers but states of being and feeling. Some modern playgoers insist that they hate and cannot comprehend these modern plays. The playwrights counter that this hate is what Oscar Wilde described as ‘the rage of Caliban at seeing his own face.’” Or, in other words, what the playgoers are seeing is the logical conclusion of the framework of thought *out of which they themselves are living*. If there is no God—no truth—no right as over against wrong—and no destiny to which all things are moving, then this picture that we see in modern drama is indeed an accurate picture. And our anger should not be directed at the playwrights, merely, who show us so well what “life” is like without God. No, it should rather be directed against this false system of thinking that now dominates our culture.

The Cinema

The Cinema gives, if anything, an even more powerful presentation of the new framework of thinking. It pictures life as a tragic joke, with no exit for man. As Francis Schaeffer has written: “The gifted cinema producers of today—Bergman, Fellini, Antonini, Slesinger, the avant-garde cinema men in Paris, or the Double Neos in Italy, all have basically the same message.” The message is that man is trapped in a meaningless void. He is thrown up by chance in a universe without meaning. In some of the earlier efforts by some of these film makers, there was an attempt to show that man could try to create his own meaning. For example, you can escape the void in which you are trapped by going into the world of dreams. But the trouble with this is that you then have no way to prove it. To use the terms of Schaeffer, you have either content without meaning (the real world) or meaning without content (the dream world). So, again, there is no genuine gain in this attempt by man to create meaning. This was brilliantly shown in the film entitled *Juliet of the Spirits*. This is the way

Schaeffer puts it:

“A student in Manchester [England] told me that he was going to see *Juliet of the Spirits* for the third time to try to work out what was real and what was fantasy in the film. I had not seen it then but I saw it later in a small art theatre in London. Had I seen it before I would have told him not to bother. One could go ten thousand times and never figure it out. It is deliberately made to prevent the viewer from distinguishing between objective reality and fantasy. There are no categories. One does not know what is real, or illusion, or psychological or insanity.”

Another film that may be compared with this is *Belle de Jour*. As another commentator describes it: “Most audiences will not find anything visually shocking about *Belle de Jour*. They will find instead a cumulative mystery: What is really happening and what is not? The film continues—switching back and forth between Severine’s real and fantasy worlds so smoothly that after a while it becomes impossible to say which is which. There is no way of knowing—and this seems to be the point of the film with which Bunuel says he is winding up his 40 year career. Fantasy, he seems to be saying, is nothing but the human dimension of reality that makes life tolerable, and sometimes even fun.”

Another way of expressing the new framework of thought is seen in the film entitled *The Silence*, by Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. It is just a series of snapshots with immoral and pornographic themes. The camera just clicks away, as it were, recording a series of unrelated and non-moral events. The message is that human life is nothing more than this: a series of unrelated events (because there is no God, and no plan governing all things) having no moral significance (because there are no absolutes). The message of another famous modern film—Antonini’s *Blow Up*—was summed up in the following advertisement which appeared in the London subways: “Murder without guilt; Love without meaning.” How could one better express the new framework of thinking?

Television

We must again point out that what we describe in these lessons does not appear in everything that is popular with people today. What we are describing in these studies is, for the most part, the leading group of modern artists—those who see most clearly the logical conclusion to which we must come if we begin with the basic ideas assumed as true in our society and culture. Because these artists are most fully held in the grip of “the spirit of the times,” they are the ones who best enable us to see the issue most clearly.

At the same time, however, it would be a great mistake to think that these things are isolated within a small circle. No, the fact is that the message of such artists as these is more and more general in our society. Again, to illustrate, we quote Francis Schaeffer. “People often ask which is better—American or BBC Television. What do you want—to be entertained to death, or to be killed with wisely planted blows? That seems to be the alternative. BBC is better in the sense that it is more serious, but it is overwhelmingly on the side of the twentieth-century mentality [new framework thinking].” He continues:

“The really dangerous thing is that our people are being taught this twentieth-century mentality without being able to understand what is happening to them. This is why this mentality has penetrated into the lower cultural levels as well as among intellectuals... We usually divide cinema and television programmes into two classes—good and bad. The term ‘good’ as used here means ‘technically good’ and does not refer to morals. The ‘good’ pictures are the serious ones, the artistic ones; the ones with good shots. The ‘bad’ are simply escapist, romantic, only for entertainment. But if we examine them with care we will notice that the ‘good’ pictures are actually the worst pictures. The escapist film may be horrible in some ways, but the so-called ‘good’ pictures of recent years have almost all been developed by men holding the modern philosophy of meaninglessness. This does not imply that they have ceased to be men of integrity, but it does mean that the films they produce are tools for teaching their beliefs... Such writers and directors are controlling the mass media, and so the force of the monolithic world-view of our age presses in on every side.”

If we once come to understand the framework, it will not be hard to see how much this “world-view of our age presses in on every side.” A recent television series produced by the BBC is a good illustration. We refer to “Man at the Top.” It depicts the ghastly life-style of a sharp business executive in modern “cut-throat” London

business. There is no morality. There is no sense of purpose in life. Whether or not there is a God is not even considered a question worth asking. Life is made to seem absurd. The program perfectly expresses the new framework concept of man trapped in a meaningless universe. Over and over *this note of emptiness, despair, and the sense of futility dominates in all of these art forms*. It is even used in the attempt to create humor by jumbling together things that once (under the old framework) were kept separate. The holy and the vile are deliberately blended, as it were, so that modern man may laugh at the old out-dated ideas that men had when there were absolutes. But in reality it is a hollow laughter. To laugh at some of the so-called comedy on television today is really to tell more about ourselves than about the programs we are watching, because it would not seem funny except to those who view it out of the new framework of thinking.

The question may be asked, whether Christians ought to have anything at all to do with these forms of art. There are Christian people who take the position that any participation in the use of these things is wrong. How can we view such things, they will say, without being corrupted by them? Others say that we cannot deal effectively with our fellow-men unless we understand these things, and to do this we must have some contact with them. We believe that there is truth in both of these arguments. We must not view just anything and everything, because it is true, these things do corrupt. Yet it is also true that there is no way of escape—complete escape—from all contact. The spirit of the age is all about us, and we who live in this age will (in one way or another) be confronted with it. So the important thing is to understand it, and combat it, and then seek to reach those who are held in its grip. There are films, stage-plays, and television programs that we have not seen—do not want to see—and do not need to see, in order to understand the new framework. Just as we can study a disease without infecting ourselves with it to see what it is like, so we can understand these art forms without necessarily viewing them ourselves. We give one example, the film entitled *The Last Tango* which was banned in some countries. According to the reviews it depicts immorality of the worst sort. It tells of a man who is finished—“over the hill,” as we would say—who gives free expression to his sexual lust in order to defy the emptiness of life and to try to find a fleeting moment of meaning. There is no need to see the film. Indeed, the Christian may not. But when news of this film is in every newspaper in the world, the Christian must know about it. One can, in other words, understand without being defiled. The Christian is commanded to keep himself unspotted from the world. He must fight against the spirit of the age. He must understand it, yes. But he may not, in order to understand it, yield himself to it. This is particularly important with respect to television, since it so often tends to condition us without our realizing it.

Questions:

1. What basic assumption is made by leading playwrights today?
2. What are some of the ways in which they express this in their plays?
3. Why do many, who view these plays, feel angry?
4. Is this anger justified?
5. What is the basic message of avant-garde cinema?
6. In what ways do cinematographers express this?
7. What was the problem experienced by the Manchester student?
8. Why do we meet the same thing, to an extent, at least on TV today?
9. Which does Schaeffer regard as better, American or British TV?
10. How does “Man at the Top” reflect new framework thinking?
11. How does “comedy” on TV often reflect this frame work?
12. Should a Christian see such stage-plays, films, and TV programs?
13. Why is it impossible to entirely escape from contact with these things?
14. Is it a duty for the Christian to understand these things? Why?
15. Why is TV a particular danger?

Projects:

1. Report in class on a play, film, or TV program. Explain to the class whether it is new framework or old.
2. Analyze your favorite TV program in terms of the old and new framework influences and report to class.