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THE DAY AFTER

Reviewed by James Michael Peters

I should like to consider ABC's recently televised film *The Day After* from two different vantage points: first, to think of it as a film, an artistic endeavor which should be judged in terms of its own cinematic merit, or lack thereof; and secondly, to treat the film as part of a larger media event in which ABC went about the business of trying to generate popular interest, profit, and "Public Service"—all in one fell swoop.

The Day After was conceived by ABC's Motion Picture president Brandon Stoddard and directed by Nicholas Meyer. What we saw several weeks ago is not what Meyers initially wanted us to see. Originally scheduled for release last May as a two part, four hour program, 50% of *The Day After* was left on the cutting room floor. This may explain why much of the film's story seems like so many dead ends linked together—no pun intended! As to the unprecedented delay of the film's release, all that was officially admitted was a lot of in-house fighting about its final form. The ABC staff must finally have come to agree that as a cinematic statement, the only thing *The Day After* would try to say is that to be nuked is one hellishly bad experience.

The real star of the film is the effects that strategic nuclear war has on two cities in Kansas and the people that populated them, some of whom we get to know a little bit before they are quickly vaporized by the blast, or slowly poisoned by fallout. These pop-up targets for the bomb are just regular people with average concerns and moderate responsibilities, whose activities are all directed toward their immediate future. There is a farm girl who is about to get married, a college student worried about registering for classes, and a medical doctor reluctantly accepting his daughter's plan to move to Boston. All these plans evaporate in the nuclear fire.

One of the most effective aspects of *The Day After* is the use of what is called "background noise" to bring the nuclear possibility into the center of attention. During the early scenes of the film we receive bits and pieces of news over radios and televisions. Slowly we are introduced to a very plausible scenario of heightened tensions between NATO and the Warsaw Pact nations in central Europe. By the time Russian armored divisions are moving against West Germany, the characters' middle class concerns fade into the background and the very real threat of thermonuclear war forces its way into everyone's life. After some thirty years of living with "the unthinkable: it is finally happening. As the minuteman missiles are launched from silos surrounded by Kansas wheat fields, Americans still find it hard to believe. One girl says, "It's only a test, isn't it?" No Dorothy, it's not a test and you'll never be able to go home to Kansas again—not even with the ruby slippers!

The Day After spends its cinematic energy in nuclear special effects. The characters and their situations lack any greater dimension than that of being a prop for the big blast, and everything thereafter seems as flattened and meaningless as the nuked landscape. As a film its central holocaust is well crafted, but the impressions will not last. It is a movie that will never leave one with the haunting images of pathological power found in Stanley Kubrick's dark comedy *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), or with the sense of complexity, tension, and nuclear surprise packed into James Harris's thriller *The Bedford Incident* (1965).

Unfortunately, as much as *The Day After* fails in trying to be a significant film it succeeded in being a media event, but then media hype has always been much easier to produce than a truly great movie which has lasting value.

The Day After was part of a well planned media campaign. What a coincidence that it was released right about the same time that the new Pershing II missiles were being deployed in Europe! It may be that ABC pulled a real Network-style strategy in order to assure itself a substantial share of the audience, and that means money and influence, all in the name of public service through good TV journalism. It turned out to be 62%, and that isn't counting the Europeans who saw the film a week before we did.

ABC's journalistic follow-up to the film was *Viewpoint*, a panel discussion consisting of several intellectuals and international policy makers moderated by Ted Koppel. I believe Dr. Kissinger, one of the panel members, identified the central flaw of the event when he angrily pointed to *The Day After*'s "simple-minded notion of the nuclear problem," and went on to ask, "are we supposed to make policy by scaring ourselves to death?" The film intentionally dealt with none of the hard questions. To do so would have meant that ABC was obviously endorsing a specific nuclear posture—and that is a no-no for the objective pretensions of TV journalism. The issues of thermonuclear technology and political relations are indeed complex. ABC's media event did little more than get our attention, and then leave us with some well worn but entrenched atomic myths, and a lot of serious questions—some of which have never really been publicly considered before!

(Editor's Note: The fifth volume of *Christianity and Civilization* is scheduled to deal with the subject of Christianity, War, and Revolution.)

Douglas F. Kelly, cd., *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction: Symposium on the Media and the Arts* (Vallecito, CA, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1983). 206 pp. Reviewed by James B. Jordan.

Given my interest in Christianity and the arts, I had been looking forward to receiving this particular issue of "The Journal of Christian Reconstruction." In addition to the material on the arts, this volume contains a couple of interesting articles, one by Jean-Marc Berthoud on conservative French Roman Catholic thinking in the area of the sciences, and another, a Eucharistic sermon by Jacques Saurin on the nature of the covenant. Both of these are excellent pieces, and editor Kelly is commended for making them available.

The rest of the volume is, for the most part, devoted to the arts and media. This section was put together by Mr. John (Quade) Saunders. It was to this part that I turned first, and I was . . . well . . . very disappointed. Part of this was my own fault, in that I had expected so much more than is delivered here. The Bible tells us that man is the image and likeness of God; thus, man is a symbol of God. Van Til has taught us that all creation symbolizes God, in that everything in creation reveals various of His attributes. Thus, the Chris-

tian has in his philosophy the foundation for a thoroughly artistic view of the world: Symbolism and art are not simply tacked on to life; they are at its very heart, at the heart of human nature.

Christian civilization is centrally oriented around the presence of God, which is most pointedly manifest in the weekly celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Thus, except where stoicism has held sway in the form of liturgical minimalism, the highest of man's artistic achievements have been ecclesiastical. Man is to bring the very best of his works, the fat of his sacrifices, the firstfruits of his labors, to the throne-hall of God. Moreover, the Bible tells us that the reconstruction of the Church has priority over the reconstruction of all the rest of life (Ezra, Haggai, etc.). Life flows from the center. The reconstruction of liturgical art is the fountain for the reconstruction of the artistry of daily life. There is not one word about this bipolarity of worship and culture in this symposium.

Human art provides two functions for man, in connection with his twin office as king and priest. As king, man is to understand and beautify the world, according to Genesis 2. Art abstracts from life in order to enhance our understanding of life. Art also adorns life. Thus some art is more intellectually oriented, as when Shakespeare displays the demonically inspired sin of personal vengeance in *Hamlet*, or of pride in *Coriolanus*. Other art is more environmental, such as architecture and background music.

As priest, man is to establish boundaries and to guard the world God has made (cf. Nehemiah). Art also functions here, reinforcing the boundaries of belief, for good or bad. Art is frequently defensive, supporting rather than challenging the beliefs of men, whether those of the majority or of a minority. Finally, though it is not one of his offices, man also functions under God as a prophet, calling sinners back to Him. Art also functions here, shaking us away from complacency. For the most part, modern art proclaims evil rather than good philosophies, but the function is still valid.

Well, to criticize a book like this for what is *not* said may not be fair; after all, it is a collection of miscellaneous essays. All the same, editor Quade might have organized a more coherent presentation.

Some of the essays are quite good. Rushdoony's essay on the "Meaning and Greatness of Christian Art" and Otto Scott's survey of world history in terms of the "The Artist as Propagandist" (prophet), are excellent, particularly Scott's, which bears several re-readings. Saunders's essay on "Christian Based Communications" spends most of its time skimming the thought of Van Til, but does make some good new points about the way non-Christian art steals from Christian presuppositions. But, that's about it for essays I personally found helpful or interesting.

Franky Schaeffer V tells us that the mass media today are anti-Christian. John Saunders's boldly-titled essay on "The Christian Theory of Drama" fills all of three pages, and spends one whole page telling us that pantheists have a problem portraying evil, illustrated by *The Return of the Jedi*. Nothing about God as the Master PlayWrite of history, of Biblical history as the core of a predestinated drama in which every act is laden with significance (symbolic meaning), or maybe the liturgical use of drama in the sacrificial system, or its prophetic use by Ezekiel, etc. There's just not enough here. This is lightweight stuff. I was disappointed.

There are a couple of essays on copyrighting, on paying the artist well, on how to sell stories to television, on the history of Hollywood. Some of the how-to's in these essays may be helpful to those attempting to practice a trade as artisans.

I want to close with two aspects of the book which stand out as problematic. The first is a statement by Rushdoony, in a brief essay on the narcotic use of art. He says that "fiction . . . denies very commonly the real world in favor of an imaginary world." Rushdoony goes on to criticize the narcotic and escapist use of art, but does not make the point that all art entails fiction because all art abstracts from life. One gets the impression that Rushdoony is opposed to fiction *per se*, though he does not actually say so. That Shakespeare and Bach can be used narcotically does not invalidate their artistic worth, or the usefulness of imaginary literature.

Finally, since my main interest is in music, I read first the essay by Martin Selbrede boldly titled "The Christian Theory of Music." I must protest this article. I wish I could answer it in depth, but the space is not available. Selbrede says that musicians are guilty of elitism because they speak of a few great masters, who were comparably better than others. I don't see how any field of labor can avoid this, nor do I see how it constitutes "elitism." We should admire and imitate excellence.

Selbrede says that every single student in a Christian school must learn to compose music, for musical literacy "must include the ability to write as well as to read music." I am all for musical literacy; my taped lectures are available from Geneva Media; I teach singing and recorder in our Christian school; but this is a bit like saying a man must know how to build a car in order to drive one. It ignores the Christian notion of the division of labor (cf. Gen. 4:21).

In this essay as in an earlier one in the previous edition of the JCR (entitled "The Christian Approach to Music"), Selbrede opposes serialist reductionism with a Hindemithian reductionism, as concerns foundational music theory. Why should we Vantillians pick between reductionism?

In that earlier essay, Selbrede argues that music probably is the most humanistic of disciplines, because of its capacity for self expression. This explains why Selbrede thinks it wrong for Christians to listen to music composed by non-Christians (p. 39): "The vast majority of music is literally heathen, heathen in origin, conception, purpose, execution, and design. . . . Thus, Christians must boldly rebuke the entire idea of secular communion with heathen composers through their music."

Selbrede confuses the philosophy of composers with the (ultimately God-given) quality of their music. We could argue just the other way, that in music the gap between theory and practice, between mind and heart perhaps, is wider than in any other artistic field, because it is so difficult to rationalize the phenomenon of music. My own tendency is to assert that the Church tradition in all Western music, and the continuing influence of the Church, has served to keep music among the most conservative and Christian of disciplines. The most radical arts are those which were driven wholly out of the Church at the Reformation.

So, all in all, despite some strong essays, this symposium is a disappointment. Finally, in spite of its new look and new typeface, this volume abounds in typographical errors.

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