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The Sixth Annual LDS Film Festival, January 17–20, 2007
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An establishing shot from *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000), giving an overview of that story’s ancient American setting. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
Establishing Shot
The Scope of Mormon Cinema

Gideon O. Burton, Film Issue Editor

An “establishing shot”—usually an exterior long shot or panoramic view—is an important orienting device used at the beginning of films. It sets the stage and the tone for what follows, often conveying a sense of the relations among the people and places depicted. While brief, it quickly gives a general sense of the story’s place in time and space. This special issue of BYU Studies is intended as an establishing shot, a brief but panoramic overview of the scope of Mormon cinema.

When asked to name Mormon movies, a Latter-day Saint might count a dozen, naming recent theatrically released films like The Other Side of Heaven (2001) or perhaps a classic Church film like Man’s Search for Happiness (1964) or Johnny Lingo (1969). But the scope of Mormon film is grander than anyone might at first guess. Stretching back to the beginning of motion pictures in the 1890s, some three thousand films have been made by and about Latter-day Saints, constituting a substantial contribution to Mormon life, popular culture, and to the history of film generally.

As editors of this special issue on Mormons and film, Randy Astle and I (and all who have worked with us) have come to appreciate the breadth and depth of the Mormon movie heritage—the sheer number of films made by and about Latter-day Saints, their variety and influence, their purposes and settings, their formats and aesthetics, their promotion and reception, and their uses and abuses. They range from the earliest silent films shown at nickelodeons near the turn of the century to the latest Mormon video podcast uploaded to YouTube; from large format IMAX films and mainstream Hollywood films to short student films, newsreel segments, and public service announcements; from elaborate Church docudramas to training videos for family history research; from films
promoting “ward teaching” to popular westerns with Mormon characters; from seminary films to television series and PBS documentaries; from visitors’ center films to HBO miniseries—the list goes on.

The range of people associated with the Mormon film heritage is equally broad, including directors, producers, editors, screenwriters, cinematographers, actors, theater owners, investors, inventors, businessmen, movie moguls, movie critics, film scholars, amateurs, and so on. Church leaders have been remarkably proactive with respect to film, especially current President Gordon B. Hinckley, whose postmission service on the Church’s Radio, Publicity, and Mission Literature Committee in the 1930s led to the institutionalization and innovation of audio and visual media for the Church, and who most recently spearheaded the creation of the Legacy Theater in the Joseph Smith Building for showcasing large-format Church films. His predecessors—especially Presidents Heber J. Grant and David O. McKay—took personal interest in developing and using film for institutional purposes. Rather than being an incidental aspect of Mormonism, beginning in the twentieth century film has been central to how The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints instructs its members and presents itself to the world, and how people both inside and outside the faith understand and come to terms with Mormon history, belief, and culture.

We present here the first comprehensive account of Mormon film, as well as the people, events, and institutions integral to that story, in Astle’s “A History of Mormon Cinema.” It is divided into five distinct periods or “waves,” whose most salient films are named in brief lists accompanying each wave. Particulars regarding every film we have catalogued in our research can be found in the Mormon Literature & Creative Arts database (http://MormonLit.lib.byu.edu), a comprehensive filmography that also includes information on hundreds of producers, directors, screenwriters, editors, and other creative personnel responsible for this substantial cinematic heritage. We have cast the net broadly, looking not only at Church films or those made independently on Mormon subjects by Latter-day Saints, but at all depictions of Mormons on film, whatever their quality, brevity, or accuracy, in all film formats (not just theatrically released commercial films). In some cases we look at films with no overt Mormon elements but which derive from Mormon history or whose principal creative personnel were Latter-day Saints. Part of the story of Mormon cinema is the range of ways in which Mormons have been involved in and influenced film generally, whether in relation to Mormon-themed films or not.

This broadness of scope is important for scholarly purposes but can make it difficult to define what a Mormon film truly is or to discern a coherent tradition. The 1914 screen adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle’s
A *Study in Scarlet* is not in the same universe as a Church-made thirty-second *Homefront* ad airing on television in the 1970s, for example. Films are so varied in purposes, styles, intended audiences, and exhibition venues that it may seem artificial to suggest any connection whatsoever among them. Moreover, many films having Mormon elements or origins have consciously avoided overt identification with Mormonism. It is also difficult to claim that films with no overt Mormon content are Mormon movies, even though Latter-day Saints were involved in their production. For example, Samuel Taylor, a Latter-day Saint, wrote the story for *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961), but this Disney comedy can hardly be considered a “Mormon” film. However, this or comparable works do figure into the story of Mormon cinema—the broader term Astle uses to encompass not just Mormon movies but the entire Mormon film heritage and culture.

“Cinema” originally referred to the building in which motion pictures were viewed, but the word now refers more broadly to the traditions and practices that constitute the dynamic phenomenon of film—artistic conception, production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. As explained in Astle’s history, the Mormon movie heritage includes all of these, due in large part (though not exclusively) to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as it has sponsored and promoted film, especially through Brigham Young University, where it created a Motion Picture Department in 1953. The first BYU student film, Robert Starling’s *Ice Cream and Elevators*, was screened at BYU in 1971, and since 1993 BYU has hosted an annual and highly attended student film festival, Final Cut. An independent LDS Film Festival has been held annually since 2001. Such venues and events for showcasing the work of aspiring filmmakers are vital to sustaining an independent cinema.

Outside of the institutional Church, cultural conditions making possible a Mormon cinema developed rapidly in the late 1970s as the Mormon retail market for books blossomed into a robust commercial distribution system for videotapes and DVDs. Exhibition of Mormon films in commercial theaters is growing slowly, but the viability of Mormon cinema at this point in time is better measured by the broad exposure to Mormon films in church settings, at film festivals, in homes through videos and DVDs, and now on the Internet (see MormonWebTV.com, for example).

To some, it might seem we have drawn the scope of Mormon cinema too large and should include only those films that fairly or faithfully represent Mormonism. However, the unflattering representation of Latter-day Saints has been more than incidental to Mormon film history. Early on, Mormons felt the impact of cinema on popular opinion by its negative influence on missionary work. In 1918, missionaries reporting from Tasmania expressed less concern about World War I than they did over *A Mormon
Maid (1917), that “immoral, villainous, and slanderous picture,” which gave them “some pretty warm times” while they were tracting.¹ “Pretty warm times” continue today in the wake of well-publicized films such as Helen Whitney’s documentary The Mormons (2007) or Christopher Cain’s September Dawn (2007). The latter film continues the earliest genre of Mormon cinema, the “Mormonsploitation film”—a term found in James D’Arc’s article, “The Mormon as Vampire,” in which he examines one such film, Trapped by the Mormons (1922). That film epitomizes how Mormon history has served as perennial fodder for sensationalist cinema. It was in response to such exploitative movies that Latter-day Saints began using film to tell their own story. At a costly $50,000, One Hundred Years of Mormonism (1913) began a long series of both Church-sponsored and independently produced films by Latter-day Saints relating their own version of Mormon history.

Within Mormon history and doctrine, Terryl Givens has found a lens for examining Mormon cinema. In his article, “There Is Room for Both: Mormon Cinema and the Paradoxes of Mormon Culture,” he situates Mormon film within three paradoxes that he claims characterize Mormonism generally: searching and certainty, the collapsing of sacred distance, and the status of Zion as both paradise and exile. Motion pictures portraying these tensions promise a more authentic and engaging portrait of Mormonism for both Latter-day Saints and general audiences. Givens applies his paradigm chiefly to the films of Richard Dutcher and to Greg Whiteley’s documentary New York Doll (2005).

The scope of Mormon cinema includes Mormon viewing practices. In their articles, film professor Sharon Swenson and philosophy professor Travis Anderson focus on ethical and spiritual dimensions of watching films. Swenson pushes past the superficial characterization of movies as entertainment to show the substantial ways movies affect human relationships and one’s interior life. She does so by narrating her experience watching Finding Nemo (2003) with her grandchild. Mormons need not be passive spectators; they can choose to incorporate film meaningfully within their family, personal, and spiritual lives. A Mormon approach to spectatorship respects the phenomenology of film—the way it is experienced and how it engages us on many levels.

Latter-day Saints are already sensitive to how movies affect them and are quick to express dissatisfaction. As I have argued elsewhere, however, Mormon cinema will not have a chance to arrive so long as Mormons are prepared only to ascertain what is morally wrong in films they see, and remain uninterested in seeking out, discriminating, or creating what is right (morally or aesthetically) in film.² Travis Anderson develops this
theme in his “Seeking after the Good in Art, Drama, Film, and Literature.” From his years of experience overseeing the International Cinema program at BYU, Anderson has noticed how some Latter-day Saints view films with a focus on finding evil rather than good. While acknowledging the power of film for evil as well as good, he urges Latter-day Saints to respond to films in ways more in keeping with their own principles.

But films must be made before they can be viewed. Production facilities, technical personnel, and funding are all necessary to realize motion pictures. Just as Latter-day Saints sought to achieve economic self-sufficiency in the nineteenth century, Latter-day Saints today must find ways to fund their own movies, thus allowing them to retain maximum creative control. For at least four decades after Message of the Ages (1930), the Church stopped producing feature films for mainstream theaters and instead funded (and independently distributed) productions without worrying about box office returns. Independent LDS filmmakers lacking such institutional backing have had to become creative about financing, especially as they have continued to compete with costly Hollywood films. In his “Finding an Audience, Paying the Bills: Competing Business Models in Mormon Cinema,” Eric Samuelsen discusses the financial dynamics that have made possible recent independent Mormon feature films. Given the typical costs for filmmaking, it is as critical that one have a business plan for a movie as a script. Because the financial aspect of filmmaking to a great degree accounts for what artistic choices are possible, some LDS filmmakers have begun to experiment with the economics of film. For example, director Kieth Merrill is currently attempting a new way to fund the films he wishes to make for audiences who are weary of Hollywood’s assault on traditional moral values. In November 2006, he launched the Audience Alliance Motion Picture Studio (AAMPS), as Samuelsen describes. It is too early to tell if this business model is viable, but the experiment demonstrates the urgency of Mormons and others in seeking alternatives to the mainstream film industry.

Another approach is to diverge radically from the size and style of conventional production that requires millions or hundreds of thousands of dollars for a film. Dean Duncan, a BYU film professor, has advocated a more modest approach to filmmaking. The short, low-cost documentary films about everyday Latter-day Saints that he proposed in “A Manifesto for ‘Fit for the Kingdom’” have now become a reality. Duncan has spearheaded the production of a dozen such films, available for viewing freely on the Internet at http://fitforthekingdom.byu.edu. One of these films, Angie, is reviewed in this issue of BYU Studies. Whether or not one agrees with Merrill’s or Duncan’s vision or whether their films are successful by
any measure, they succeed in promoting the application of LDS belief and standards to the medium. Such considerations can certainly lead to more distinctively Mormon film aesthetics and practices.

If minority cinemas find their voice in contrast to the dominant cinema, then Mormon cinema will not find its proper voice so long as it remains culturally obsequious to mainstream filmmaking approaches. If Mormonism has its own way of viewing the world, its filmmakers should reach for an authentic artistic means for expressing that worldview. This requires more than moral dissatisfaction with the status quo; it requires the careful articulation of aesthetics—the stylistic choices through which one realizes a “vision” of film and implicitly expresses one’s beliefs. In “Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic,” Thomas Lefler and I use the Church film Legacy as a way of foregrounding three different aesthetic models: the classical Hollywood style, a “transcendental style” discernible in some international filmmakers’ work, and a third style based on the ideas of community and communion found in the Christian concept of the body of Christ. Central to our argument is the spiritual valence to aesthetic choices: the techniques by which one creates a film affect its spiritual impact, making it all the more important to know the elements of filmmaking and how these work together to create certain effects. Film is taken very seriously as a medium for religious ideas, and Mormon filmmakers and viewers would do well to learn the history of religious film and to join both scholarly and popular conversation about spirituality and film. To that discussion Latter-day Saints can bring the insights peculiar to their theology.

Much more remains to be said about Mormonism and film, and not only to LDS audiences. Important questions about cinematic authenticity are raised in Mormon film history as different varieties of representation and sponsorship have affected the character and reception of LDS films and mediated Mormon identity. Emerging Mormon film genres, such as the missionary movie, invite comparisons to mainstream genres and to literary antecedents. Book of Mormon films will need the same theoretical attention that biblical films have received. Mormon documentary films and docudramas need to be understood within film history and within theoretical and cultural contexts. Unique LDS cultural practices such as the ward movie night or the use of filmstrips in proselytizing beg analysis, as does the Mormon interest in spectacle that predates film with pageants and parades. And we have barely begun to consider film either as a mode of personal LDS expression or as an agent of social change. Mormon film also needs evaluating from political, psychological, and gender perspectives. Institutional film needs its own study, as it has varied drastically in its settings, formats, and purposes. Its genres and styles,
like those of independent and experimental Mormon films, need to be identified and evaluated.

Critical discourse about Mormon film is a sign of it becoming its own cinema. What Wayne Booth once said with respect to Mormon literature is doubly true of Mormon movies: “We won’t get a great artistic culture until we have a great critical culture.” The one makes the other possible. However successful Mormon filmmaking may be in other respects, no distinctive cinema is possible without adequate means in place for response and critique. A cinema of one’s own requires a critical mass of criticism by those who are invested in the culture and articulate regarding both concept and craft. It is hoped this volume of BYU Studies and ongoing reviews of Mormon films on the BYU Studies review web page will contribute to establishing such critical discourse.

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3. See https://www.audiencealliance.com/join.php. The AAMPS website adamantly proclaims the family-friendly values driving this experiment: “Audience Alliance Motion Picture Studios . . . is an alliance of people who love going to movies but are sick and tired of getting unexpectedly ambushed by those one or two gratuitous scenes that ruin an otherwise good film. It is a grand alliance of families who want more . . . motion pictures with heart, humor, great stories, premium production qualities, and that embrace traditional values and virtues.”
Salt Lake City’s first and only “Brigham Young Day,” August 23, 1940, celebrating the premiere of Twentieth Century Fox’s *Brigham Young*. Dean Jagger, who proved a remarkable likeness to Brigham Young, waves to a crowd of Latter-day Saints, who were enthusiastic that their second prophet and the LDS faith were being depicted seriously in a nationally prominent motion picture. Perry Special Collections, BYU.
A History of Mormon Cinema

Randy Astle with Gideon O. Burton

On March 10, 2000, Richard Dutcher’s film God’s Army was released in Utah-area theaters. It was a seemingly new entity: a feature film created by a Latter-day Saint, about Mormon life (missionary work), and marketed primarily toward LDS audiences. At the time, the website of Dutcher’s company, Zion Films, paraphrased a prophecy of Spencer W. Kimball, famous among LDS filmmakers, of a future day “when our films, charged with the faith, heartbeats, and courage of our people would play in every movie center and cover every part of the globe. . . . A day when Mormon filmmakers, with the inspiration of heaven, would produce masterpieces which will live forever.”1 The website then confidently affirmed, “That day has come.” It described God’s Army as “the first of many unique and enduring Mormon films,” stating that “such an endeavor has not been attempted before” and “after seeing this film, you will ask yourself, ‘Why hasn’t anyone done this before?’”2 With the commercial success of God’s Army, the notion that it was indeed the “first Mormon film”—with Dutcher himself “the father of Mormon cinema”—generally caught hold with critics, the public, and even Dutcher’s competitors.3

Even though Dutcher’s contributions were notably significant, Mormon movies actually began a century earlier, soon after the beginning of film itself, and successive generations have reinvented, redefined, and repeatedly heralded the advent of Mormon film. Sixty years before God’s Army, Twentieth Century Fox premiered Brigham Young in Salt Lake City. On that day, Friday, August 23, 1940, shops, schools, and businesses closed; both Governor Henry Blood and Mayor Ab Jenkins declared it a holiday (“Brigham Young Day”); and the city’s population swelled from 150,000 to 250,000, with 100,000 people packing the streets to glimpse a gala parade.
of the studio’s stars.\(^4\) There were shop window competitions and special supplements in both the *Salt Lake Tribune* and *Deseret News*. President Heber J. Grant held a banquet in the Lion House to honor the city’s distinguished guests, and that night, The Centre cinema—the city’s largest—sold out at a pricey $1.10 per ticket, and thus six more theaters, totaling nearly 9,000 seats, were filled for a simultaneous showing, making this world premiere the largest in Hollywood history to that point. The crowds, seen in newsreel footage, easily surpass those of any modern general conference or Sundance Film Festival, rivaling the foot traffic of the 2002 Winter Olympics. With President Grant’s public benediction on the film—given a few days earlier—fresh in their minds, surely the ecstatic Latter-day Saints present would have thought themselves justified in declaring that Mormon cinema had arrived.\(^5\)

Indeed, the cries of “Mormon cinema is born!” in 2000 echoed similar proclamations from 1977, 1953, 1940, and on back to 1913.\(^6\) In February of that year, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints produced *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*\(^7\) in response to a spate of sensational Mormon-themed films that had been showing successfully in Europe and America.

A full fifteen years later, in 1928, when the Church announced the production of its second historical film (and the first with an original
musical score), *All Faces West*, it prompted the *Detroit Michigan Free Press* to write, “At last the story of the Mormons is to be filmed!” A month later the *Cleveland Ohio News* confirmed that “the first Mormon picture is finished.” Both newspapers were ignorant of previous Church-produced and independent theatrical films that had been alternately celebrating or exploiting the Mormon story for years.

Movies and Mormonism took to each other quickly, but this is hardly known in the absence of any comprehensive history of Mormon film. While I am not able to give an exhaustive history here, it is my intention to give a more complete and coherent account than has previously been available in any single source; to bring to light largely unrecognized films, filmmakers, and movements (some artistically superior to their better-known counterparts); and to provide an accurate contextual framework for the production and reception of Mormon films, past and present.

I offer this history as a starting point from which future critics, filmmakers, and spectators may build. The necessary brevity of this history may open the way for more detailed discussions on specific films, people, eras, and movements. The five historical periods or “waves” that I have used to structure this history, while not definitive, are intended as a framework within which past, contemporary, and even future films may be examined.

**Definitions and Scope**

Since *God’s Army*, “LDS cinema” or “Mormon cinema” has been the label given to commercial feature films that are marketed primarily to a Latter-day Saint audience and that include an LDS director and Mormon-themed subject matter. Such a narrow definition, however, proves inadequate for evaluating the full spectrum and impact of films relating to Mormonism and would exclude films as diverse and important as Twentieth Century Fox’s *Brigham Young* (1940), HBO’s *Angels in America* (2003), or any of the hundreds of influential institutional Church films that have been produced, whether *Man’s Search for Happiness* (1964), *Johnny Lingo* (1969), or *Legacy* (1993). In this history, as is conventional in academic studies, I have used “Latter-day Saint” or “LDS” to refer specifically to the Church or its members, while reserving “Mormon” to refer more broadly to the culture; hence the preference for the term “Mormon cinema,” even though most Latter-day Saints refer to the movement as “LDS cinema.”

My purpose is to survey the historical relationship between movies and Mormonism generally, including the people, events, and cultural
A rather precarious crane shot during the production of the Church’s 1987 remake of *Man’s Search for Happiness* (1964). Institutional LDS films are a prominent component of Mormon cinema, epitomizing Mormon movies for many. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

The scene resulting from the above crane shot for *Man’s Search for Happiness*. Southern Utah and Arizona deserts have been repeatedly used in filmmaking because of their dramatic vistas. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
forces both within the LDS faith and without that have shaped the evolution of Mormon filmmaking; the role of film in Mormon life; and the way Latter-day Saints have been depicted on film by others. These histories are intertwined: mainstream Mormon-themed films made outside of (and often in opposition to) the faith provoked institutional filmmaking; in turn, the production and widespread use of films by the Church and its various institutions over the last century vindicated the medium and trained and encouraged Latter-day Saints to develop the film arts in new and independent ways. Some LDS filmmakers, Dutcher in particular, have reacted against institutional films, creating movies that eschew the idealistic characterizations and storylines so common in Church productions. Even those Latter-day Saints who never deal with Mormon subjects but who have participated in the entertainment industry as actors, technicians, and creative personnel fit into the story, since Mormon film productions (institutional or private) have relied upon the talents of those experienced in the mainstream industry. The emergence and increasing robustness of Mormon cinema is in fact due to all of these factors, and not just to the recent efforts of a few individuals or films, however noteworthy they have been.

Below I outline the five periods or “waves” of Mormon cinema that make up its history. Running through all of these periods are four distinct subcurrents that help to further organize the chronological discussion. Each is more or less prominent in a given period, but all occur in each of the five waves and together they constitute the larger field of Mormon cinema:

1. Depictions of Mormons in Mainstream Films
2. Institutional (Church) Films
3. Independent Mormon Films
4. Latter-day Saints Working in the Mainstream Industry

Mormon literary scholars have taken a similar approach to these four categories in their construction of the comprehensive Mormon Literature & Creative Arts database, which in addition to literary works by and about Mormons includes titles by non-Mormons important for their depiction of Latter-day Saints (like the Sherlock Holmes novel *A Study in Scarlet*—later adapted to film) and mainstream work with no discernible Mormon content authored by Latter-day Saints (such as Anne Perry’s Victorian detective novels). It is my hope that a broad survey—including all aspects of cinema as a social phenomenon—will help create connections and continuity for the reader and expand the concept of what we can rightfully consider the domain of Mormon cinema.
Five Waves of Mormon Cinema

The history of Mormon film divides naturally into five distinct chronological periods beginning in 1905 and averaging twenty-four years each, with God’s Army marking the beginning of the fifth. Similar constructs in the history of Mormon literature and some national cinemas name such periods “generations,” but here I use the term “waves” for two reasons. First, the brevity of the periods has allowed many individuals to work in multiple eras, something not implied in a generational label. Second, a “new wave”—a popular term in film history—indicates not just a personnel or chronological difference but a fundamental artistic difference between the new and the old it is replacing. The most famous cinematic new waves all materialized as conscious reactions against preceding norms, using innovative stylistic techniques to emphasize their independence. Eventually these new modes are absorbed into mainstream practice, making way for another wave to replace them.

Despite the danger of oversimplification inherent in such a straightforward model, I feel that introducing such a construct into the history of Mormon film can be immensely useful. It provides a convenient shorthand, for instance, allowing for labels such as “a Fifth Wave film,” but, more importantly, it reveals historical patterns present in each period. By looking at the waves that have preceded it, we can expect the Fifth Wave, which since 2004 has entered something of a production slump, to gradually expand until a critical mass is reached and something new emerges, resulting in the advent of a Sixth Wave in the 2020s. Other critics are certainly encouraged to amend, challenge, or replace the five-wave structure, but it is my hope that from this point forward at least some model will be in place to contextualize discussions of Mormon film.

The First Wave (1905–1929):
The Clawson Brothers and the New Frontier

This period coincides roughly with cinema’s silent era (before the introduction of synchronous soundtracks). Films in this period divide fairly distinctly between sensationalist pictures aimed at exploiting Mormonism’s peculiar history and somewhat propagandistic films made in response to these by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and those sympathetic to it. Both types of pictures were shot on 35mm black-and-white film and were generally released to a paying public in commercial cinemas.
The Second Wave (1929–1953): Home Cinema

This period has sometimes been considered a hiatus in LDS filmmaking, though this is increasingly apparent as a misinterpretation. Pioneering work in filmstrips, radio, and hitherto unheralded motion pictures was laying the groundwork for all future institutional filmmaking. Depictions from outside the Church were fewer but kinder in their representations. On a technical level, both sound and cheaper 16mm film stock were introduced, with the occasional use of color. During this period the Church nurtured a tremendous private film distribution network that sidestepped commercial theaters, not only allowing filmmakers to make works that otherwise would not have existed, but creating a culture of cinematic awareness among Latter-day Saints.

The Third Wave (1953–1974): Judge Whitaker and the Classical Era

The newly created BYU Motion Picture Studio started the production of hundreds of Church films, generally on 16mm film stock, distributed privately throughout the Church for multiple purposes and audiences. Additional independent Mormon films were attempted, and depictions of Mormons in mainstream films returned to showing them as objects of curiosity as Hollywood standards relaxed.


The advent of video reduced costs and provided additional distribution outlets, allowing many more Latter-day Saints to complete productions within the marketplace and causing the total quantity of independent works to increase dramatically. The Church also enlarged the scope of its work by creating other production entities beyond BYU, often shooting on 35mm or even 70mm stock, and distributing its work through a variety of channels including satellite broadcasts, television, VHS cassettes, and destination cinemas at Church-owned visitors’ centers. Depictions of Mormons in mainstream film once again returned to sensationalist representations, while large numbers of Latter-day Saints were working in the entertainment industry.


Independent Mormon productions released on 35mm film in commercial theaters to a paying public have established a niche market within American Mormonism. Video and DVD distribution of institutional and independent Mormon film are expanding, while Internet and digital film
suggest new formats and modes of distribution. An LDS Film Festival now coincides annually with the Sundance Film Festival. Institutional, independent, and mainstream treatments of Mormon themes, while still distinct, have begun treating Mormonism with more complexity. Latter-day Saints are starting to sense the emergence and importance of their own film tradition, suggesting the beginning of a culturally identifiable (but institutionally independent) Mormon cinema.

The Historical Setting

The advent of movies in the 1890s coincided with important cultural changes within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that indicated a shift from pioneer isolation to twentieth-century integration. The Manifesto ending polygamy came in 1890, and the Salt Lake Temple was dedicated in 1893, ending forty years of construction and concretely symbolizing the end of the pioneer period. The temple’s interior murals were completed by artists who had been sent, as missionaries, to the Académie Julian in Paris where they became trained in modern styles such as Impressionism and Expressionism. The murals thus had much more in common with the French avant-garde than with the stark images of previous Mormon painters. Additionally, the Church dissolved the local People’s Party, encouraging members to affiliate with national political parties; it also closed down most of its private academies to accommodate the previously distrusted public schools and sold off most of its businesses. Such conciliatory efforts were rewarded when Utah gained its long-awaited statehood on January 4, 1896. Similarly, by the 1890s Church leaders cautiously ceased admonishing converts to move to Utah, essentially marking the end of the gathering period. In short, the focus of the Church began to shift from inward isolation to outward accommodation. The Church was now ready to engage the world.

It is particularly fitting that the Church’s first recorded brush with film came in 1898, in a situation consciously designed to demonstrate Latter-day Saints’ similarity to other Americans. The Spanish-American War was America’s first conflict after Utah’s admission to the union, and the majority of LDS Utahns viewed it as an opportunity to display their patriotism. Hence, when Colonel Jay L. Torrey secured legislation to form three companies of elite cavalry—the Rough Riders—Utahns reacted with enthusiasm, with many enlisting in Torrey’s own regiment, known as the Rocky Mountain Riders. John Q. Cannon—son of George Q. Cannon, First Counselor in the First Presidency—became captain of the Utah Company,
which consisted of eighty-six men, mostly LDS. The group was mustered into service on May 15, 1898, at Fort Russell, Wyoming, and traveled by rail to Jacksonville, Florida, where they remained throughout the summer. Thus they missed the famous charge up San Juan Hill but were on hand in July to be filmed by the American Mutoscope Company. Among many other titles filmed of the troops is one entitled *Salt Lake City Company of Rocky Mountain Riders*, a lengthy 154-foot piece (approximately two and a half minutes) probably released immediately. While the Utah Company was disappointed not to engage the Spanish, Cannon and his men apparently did become the first Latter-day Saints—or Utahns, for that matter—to be filmed.\(^{12}\)

Less is known about when Latter-day Saints, in Utah or elsewhere, first viewed moving pictures. Early on, “editorials in Utah as elsewhere echoed the concern, particularly of churchmen, that the unparalleled impact of the moving picture image would harmfully influence susceptible minds.”\(^{13}\) It would not be long, however, before exhibition venues proliferated in the state, and by the close of cinema’s first decade Mormon communities such as Salt Lake City reportedly had exhibition facilities comparable to any city in the nation. The Mormons were ready for the movies.
Brothers Chester and Shirley Clawson. These two prolific Mormon filmmakers can effectually be credited with creating Mormon cinema. Their pioneering cinematic work was emblematic of the films made during the First Wave and set the stage for everything that has come since. Perry Special Collections, BYU.
The First Wave:
The Clawson Brothers and the New Frontier (1905–1929)

In calling this era the new frontier, there is some danger of forgetting the large industrial organizations that supported film’s early pioneers. The analogy, however, is of some use here not only because of Utah’s recent pioneer past at the turn of the century—only a generation removed—but primarily because of the proud, isolationist stance LDS filmmakers were forced to assume in response to the mainstream industry’s attacks on their religion. With no political redress or recourse to non-Mormon allies, the Latter-day Saints were left to their own devices to depict what they saw as the glories of their scriptures, forebears, and modern leaders. They had their guides, to be certain—modern Jim Bridgers like Thomas Ince or D. W. Griffith—but Mormon filmmakers seem to have felt they were blazing ahead where none had gone before, where God wanted them to go.

Beginning an Era: A Trip to Salt Lake City

Before 1905, movies had been shown in a variety of transient settings such as carnivals and vaudeville shows, but that June a Pittsburgh storefront was converted into the first nickelodeon—a permanent projection facility so called for its admission price of five cents—and a boom of such venues swept the country. On the cusp of this movement came a typical one-shot comedy titled A Trip to Salt Lake City. Made by American Mutoscope & Biograph, the same firm that under its previous name had filmed the Rocky Mountain Riders, the picture depicts the interior of a Pullman railway car in which several women in succession deposit young children into sleeping berths. Finally a single father arrives, and, after being overwhelmed by his enthusiastic progeny then henpecked by his formidable spouses, he briefly exits to retrieve a large water canister. He supplies drinking hoses to each bunk, thus meeting the needs of his large family. An impressed railroad employee congratulates the polygamist on his ingenuity.

Given the sensationalist use of Mormonism in Victorian literature, it is amazing that a satirical film on Mormons did not come earlier or that there were not more of them. This particular production, however, was certainly brought about by the Senate hearing for the seating of Apostle Reed Smoot, a controversial and high-publicity event, begun in 1904, that had called national attention to polygamy in the post-Manifesto Church. Amid this larger controversy, A Trip to Salt Lake City failed to gain any response from Church leaders as later films would, perhaps because it was
Key Films of the First Wave

- *Salt Lake City Company of Rocky Mountain Riders* (1898, USA, director unknown, 2 minutes 34 seconds). First recorded filming of Latter-day Saints in early newsreel of the Spanish-American War.

- *A Trip to Salt Lake City* (1905, USA, director unknown, 3 minutes). First fiction film with Mormon content, a satire on modern polygamy made during the Reed Smoot Senate hearings.

- *A Victim of the Mormons* (1911, Denmark, director August Blom, approximately 60 minutes). First major anti-Mormon film, which sparked a fad in 1912 and afterwards.

- *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (1913, USA, director Norval MacGregor, 90 minutes). First theatrical feature film created by the LDS Church.

- *The Life of Nephi* (1915, USA, producer William A. Morton, 3 reels). Part of an aborted effort to bring the entire Book of Mormon to the silver screen; the first cinematic depiction of the Book of Mormon.

- Clawson brothers films (1916–1929, USA, directors Shirl and Chet Clawson, various lengths). First Church-sponsored documentaries on Mormon subjects, events, and leaders.

- *A Mormon Maid* (1917, USA, director Robert Z. Leonard, 65 minutes). The most significant anti-Mormon film of the silent era.

- *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922, UK, director H. B. Parkinson, 97 minutes). Famed but slightly overhyped anti-Mormon film that marked the genre’s temporary demise.

- *All Faces West* (1929, USA, director George Edward Lewis, unknown length of several reels). Second (and last) Church-produced theatrical feature film.
so mild-mannered, perhaps because they thought it more astute to ignore it, or perhaps because it never even came to their attention. It remains unknown, for instance, if it ever actually played in the city of its title. Regardless, *A Trip to Salt Lake City* is representative of a trend in early motion pictures not only to respond to current events but to capitalize on stereotypes that had been staples in nineteenth-century literature.\(^\text{15}\)

**Mormons and the Mainstream Industry**

**Commercial Distribution and Exhibition**

Patronage was the first major contribution Latter-day Saints made to the film industry, and it has remained a consistent and powerful force throughout their history, influencing not just LDS filmmakers but millions more who have never touched a camera. Hence, a history of the beginnings of film exhibition in Utah is fitting to a history of Mormons and film. By 1905 enough Utahns were patronizing the nickelodeons for proper cinemas to soon spring up in their wake. D. Lester Park, who would become a prominent figure throughout the First Wave, laid claim to being “the first man to show a motion picture in the state.”\(^\text{16}\) Whether this was true or not, by 1905 he had become perhaps the most prominent local film distributor.

He was soon rivaled, however, by William W. Hodkinson, a non-Mormon who began exhibiting films in Ogden in 1907 and soon branched out to San Francisco and Los Angeles. He named his company Paramount and created a logo of stars and a mountain peak probably based on Ogden’s Mount Ben Lomond. In 1914 he entered groundbreaking distribution agreements with various studios but was soon removed from power by the ambitious head of one of these, Adolph Zukor, under whom Paramount continued to grow; today it is the oldest studio in America. Hodkinson never repeated the success of his first venture, but his influence in revolutionizing film distribution—which grew in part out of Utah’s enthusiastic cinematic culture—was great enough that he has been described as “the man who invented Hollywood.”\(^\text{17}\)

Of course, Utah film distribution boomed beyond the efforts of these two men. In 1908 the first proper cinema in Salt Lake opened, Harry Rand’s 300-seat Empire Theater at 158 South State Street. This was followed by venues like the American Theatre, which opened at 241 South Main Street on July 8, 1913, at the cusp of the picture palace craze. With 3,000 seats and a 165-foot lobby, it was touted as the largest movie theater in the world. The citizens of Salt Lake City had proven just how much they loved the movies,
and the Mormons among them had begun their love affair with the maxim that bigger is better. Cinemas stretched from Brigham City in the north to Moab in the south, bringing much of small-town Utah into touch with the rest of America for the first time. By the beginning of the 1920s Salt Lake City had four more large theaters, Ogden two, and Provo one.\(^{18}\)

![The interior of the Salt Lake Theatre. Built in 1862, it played a pivotal role in early Mormon dramatics and became a popular cinema in the 1910s. On February 3, 1913, it housed the premiere of the first great Church feature film, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*. Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved.](image-url)
It was estimated that in 1921, 30,000 people attended the movies in the greater Salt Lake area every day. Such high levels of patronage, combined with national attitudes of the Progressive Era, catalyzed a private force in film exhibition that would arguably have a greater influence on Mormon culture than Hollywood. This new player in film exhibition was none other than the LDS Church itself.

**Private Church Film Distribution in the Context of Social Reform**

The growth of cinema in Utah couldn’t help but prompt a response from Church leaders, who quickly grasped film’s educational and socializing promise as well as its demoralizing and dangerous potential. Hence, they taught that strict control must be exercised over film screenings and similar social functions. The roots of this position, of course, long predate the movies and have their basis not so much in moral censorship as in the Church’s effort to shape the social conditions of its members. Corresponding with a larger reformation movement in America, the LDS Church created programs and institutions that would permanently reshape its social climate. Those changes also influenced Mormon attitudes toward movies.

With the turn of the century, specific social entertainments such as dancing and picnics began to come under Church scrutiny. Local and general “amusement committees” were formed, and many stakes began building and operating amusement halls. This reformation impulse led to numerous programs, including the creation of libraries and gymnasiums, soon often attached to chapels within a single structure; the resultant organization of sporting tournaments, primarily basketball; the adoption of the new Boy Scouts of America program in 1913; the creation of “road shows” or “merry-go-rounds” to encourage wholesome theatricals; and the introduction of a Tuesday night “family home evening,” which was begun by the Granite stake in Salt Lake City in 1909 but adopted Church-wide by 1915.

It was within this milieu that private Church film exhibition was born. Spurred on by the successful film exhibition of the Salt Lake City Methodists in June 1911, members of the LDS Sunday School superintendency, particularly Salt Lake Theatre manager George D. Pyper, began investigating the possibility of using film. Pyper secured the biblical movie *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) for private exhibition in the autumn of 1913. Though this was successful, subsequent attempts to exhibit films waited for two additional events: the creation in 1916 of an LDS Social Advisory Committee, with Apostle Stephen L. Richards as chair and Pyper as assistant chair, and the end of World War I in 1918, after which national
interest in film’s didactic potential increased. At a Social Advisory Committee meeting on December 16, 1919, Pyper and William A. Morton proposed regularizing Church-sponsored “motion picture evenings” at LDS amusement halls.22 The concept was accepted and promoted, soon making film exhibition a Church-wide, if initially uncoordinated, endeavor. It is noteworthy that rather than simply condemning or censoring motion pictures, the LDS Church sought to appropriate the new medium into its evolving social institutions. This would pave the way, ultimately, for the institutional production of film as well.

**Mormons Go to Hollywood**

While Church officials were engaged in bringing Hollywood’s product to the Great Basin, other Latter-day Saints were heading to Los Angeles, where in 1923 the Church organized the first stake outside the Rocky Mountains. As the film industry grew in southern California, Church members were working in a variety of capacities.

Some may wonder what Latter-day Saints working in the mainstream entertainment industry have to do with films that deal explicitly with Mormonism. The relationship is far more than a cultural curiosity, as it happens. First, LDS filmmakers who have made Church-related films have also spent a large portion of their careers on mainstream secular work. Second, the LDS beliefs or roots of these people have influenced their secular work, often infusing some mainstream films with a Mormon worldview. Third, there are multiple instances of nonpracticing Mormons contributing directly to institutional and independent Mormon films. Fourth, the accumulation of Latter-day Saint professionals—even completely irreligious ones—in the mainstream industry has led to a critical mass of talent, allowing Mormon cinema to eventually emerge as a distinguishable entity. It is safe to say that there would be no Mormon cinema today—institutional or independent—if not for generations of Latter-day Saint filmmakers working in California over the past century: Los Angeles has been just as important to Mormon film as Salt Lake City or Provo.

Although he did not actively practice his religion, the most significant ethnic Mormon director of the silent era was James Cruze, whose career included titles like *The Covered Wagon* (1923), *The Pony Express* (1925), *I Cover the Waterfront* (1933), and *Gangs of New York* (1938). *The Covered Wagon* has often been credited with reviving the dying genre of the western, and its success made Cruze the highest-paid director in the world.23

Several Latter-day Saints also made names for themselves as screenwriters and actors, but interestingly the two most influential Church
members were not filmmakers but scientists. Physicist Harvey Fletcher joined Western Electric’s Research Division in 1916, where he helped develop the hearing aid with a vacuum tube. His later work at Bell Labs led to the perfection of binaural sound reproduction; in December 1931, with Arthur C. Keller and Leopold Stokowski, he created the first stereophonic recording. Stereo first appeared in the movies in *The Robe* (1953) and became common after 1975. Its effect on the film and music industries is incalculable, and most historians of audio technology deem Harvey Fletcher its primary father.24

Philo T. Farnsworth grew up in Rigby, Idaho, where he proved to be a prodigious scientist. According to legend, fourteen-year-old Philo noticed the straight rows he was plowing in his father’s field and struck upon the concept of video scanning by sending individual electrons in a series of similar lines. In San Francisco, he achieved the first all-electronic television transmission on September 7, 1927. His wife, Pem, and brother-in-law B. Clifford Gardner, both LDS, soon became the first human beings to have their images transported by video. Lengthy custody battles ensued with RCA, but eventually the U.S. Patent Office legally established Farnsworth as the sole inventor of television, and in the ensuing years he has gained minor celebrity status within the Church. A year before his death, Farnsworth stated, “I know that I never invented anything. I have been a medium by which these things were given to the culture as fast as culture could earn them. I give the credit to God.”25

**Hollywood Comes to the Mormons**

In addition to Latter-day Saints going to Hollywood in the First Wave, it did not take long for Hollywood to discover Utah. The filming of major movies in the state may seem tangential to Mormon cinema proper, but it too has enhanced a reciprocal relationship between the industry and the Latter-day Saints. By the 1920s, studio filming began to place Utah on the global map, perhaps the first time the state had been thought of as anything other than the isolated land of the Latter-day Saints. Cinematic representations of Utah have indirectly helped to mainstream the Mormons within American culture. Most early productions took place in the open deserts and canyons of the south; Monument Valley alone has become one of the most trafficked locations in cinema history. John Ford, who first shot in Utah for *Iron Horse* in 1924, had a particularly fruitful relationship with the state, shooting over a half dozen films there and causing Monument Valley and the Moab area to become known the world over as “John Ford Country.” Since the 1920s, hundreds of films, westerns and otherwise, have
been made, partially or entirely, in southern Utah, resulting in strong film bureaus that organizations in the population centers to the north have only recently matched.26

**Mainstream Depictions of Mormons**

**A Victim of the Mormons: The Anti-Mormon Film Begins**

It is unknown if any Mormon-themed films followed closely behind *A Trip to Salt Lake City*, but in 1911 a slew of anti-Mormon productions began with a vehemence that shocked Church members. The first of these was apparently *Tilly and the Mormon Missionary*, released in England that August,27 but, as a farce, its impact was negligible, and it was soon followed by a much more notorious production, the Danish *A Victim of the Mormons*, released on October 2, 1911, in Copenhagen.

*A Victim of the Mormons* (*Mormonens Offer*) tells the story of Florence Grange, whose brother George introduces her to an old friend named Reverend Andrew Larson, a Mormon missionary who quickly woos her away from her fiancé, Leslie, and abscends with her to Utah. George and Leslie set off in a pursuit that crosses the ocean and continent; en route Florence has a change of heart and must be detained forcibly, eventually becoming imprisoned with Larson’s first wife in Salt Lake City. After the depiction of a baptism in the Mormon temple, George and Leslie chase Larson home where he falls through a trapdoor into Florence’s basement cell. In the ensuing fight, Larson tries to shoot Florence, but Leslie deflects the shot and the bullet kills Larson instead.28

Denmark’s film industry at this time was one of the strongest in the world, and *A Victim of the Mormons*’ production company, Nordisk Films, was well established in Europe and North America. The picture fully exploited the developing star system and was directed by the well-known August Blom. At three reels’ length—roughly an hour—it was not only the longest Danish film of 1911 but also one of the longest ever up to that point. The prestige of such a production compelled Latter-day Saints in Europe and America to respond. In Scandinavia and England—*Victim* premiered in London a week after its Copenhagen debut—missionaries soon standardized their response by standing outside theaters and distributing pamphlets, including a tract specially written by European Mission President Rudger Clawson entitled “The Anti-‘Mormon’ Moving Pictures and Play.”29 Here we see the first direct connection between filmic depictions of Mormons and LDS missionary work. The Church would first fight these
negative depictions, then counter them with their own film productions to compete for a more authentic representation of Mormonism to the masses.

A Victim of the Mormons was slated for a U.S. premiere on February 3, 1912, and Church leaders and members across the country launched a multipronged campaign to suppress it. Eventually the National Board of Censorship withdrew its support of the picture, but Nordisk released the film anyway, actually using the Mormon protest as free publicity.30 What began as one sensational film quickly became a deluge, with at least a half dozen similar titles emerging in 1912. The experience of these two years determined how the Church has seen and approached cinema ever since. It becomes worthwhile, therefore, to examine the genesis of the anti-Mormon pictures themselves.

The Roots of Anti-Mormon Cinema

Cinematic exploitation of Mormonism apparently evolved from nineteenth-century literature, beginning with Edward Marryat’s 1843 Monsieur Violet: His Travels and Adventures among the Snake Indians. This book introduced a new element into fiction: the marauding Danite agent. Briefly existing in the Missouri conflicts in the summer of 1838, the Danites gained a new life in literature and succeeded in becoming the “myth that would define Mormonism,” appearing in at least fifty-six books before 1900, most of which included polygamous storylines as well.32

Why such a great interest in Mormonism in general and polygamy and Danites in particular? It served as an activity of self-definition for American and British societies, as Mormonism proved an exemplary foil against which to contrast conservative values. Of much more immediate interest, however, was profit. Mormonism lent itself to sensationalism, and “the evil fact of polygamy made credible almost any fiction. . . . A lucrative market existed for Mormon stories, which appealed both to the reform-minded and the curious, the pious and the prurient. . . . Victorian novelists dwelt on myths about the Mormons because the facts were simply too mundane.”33

If the genre was beginning to wane by the 1890s, anti-Mormon sentiment received fresh impetus with the aforementioned Reed Smoot hearings. A muckraking yellow press contributed to popular impressions of clandestine polygamists and other more fictitious entities such as modern Danites. There were visually based affronts, most often in the form of illustrated magic lantern lectures but also including the illicit photographs Max Florence took of the Salt Lake Temple interior in September 1911.34 The literary genre also revived, from ostensibly nonfiction accounts to the novels of the new British author Winifred Graham, who became a
major anti-Mormon crusader for the next fifteen years, helping formulate an organized crusade in 1911. In this year, anti-Mormon rallies were held throughout England, and though the government took no action against the Church, there were a few cases of mob violence. Much of the activity took shape in the form of propaganda like Graham’s *The Love Story of a Mormon* and the play *Through Death Valley, or The Mormon Peril*, both of which paved the way for cinematic representations.

The few silent anti-Mormon films that are available today are generally seen as camp and are received with great bemusement, but within this historical milieu of rising anti-Mormon sentiment, Latter-day Saints appropriately considered these films serious assaults. The threat to the Church, especially with the onslaught that arrived in 1912, was palpable.

**Waxing and Waning: Anti-Mormon Films 1912–1922**

The rapid release rate of anti-Mormon films in 1912 meant that a great many of them were underway in 1911, with at least one, a Danish copycat film called *The Flower of the Mormon City* (*Mormonbyens Blomst*), released late that year. This and subsequent titles generally tended to focus on the Old West—which providing a more likely context for the Danite element—rather than on modern missionaries. Though it is unknown if Church leaders were aware of *Flower*, by January 1912 they were fighting two more pictures: *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* and *The Mormon*. The first of these was distributed by the French firm Pathé Frères, the largest film company in the world, which wasn’t about to capitulate to complaints from Utah. Flying A, producer of *The Mormon*, was likewise pressured to drop Mormon references, but the film was released under the intended title on January 25. Further films came in the form of *An Episode of Early Mormon Days*, *Marriage or Death*, and *The Danites*, all of which were released despite the Church’s efforts.

There would never again be another onslaught as heavy as this, and three European offerings from the mid-1910s, all based on the Sherlock Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet*, offered little threat as World War I diverted attention from the Mormon problem. The war was not a big enough deterrent in the U.S., however, as anti-Mormon films reached their zenith with the 1917 *A Mormon Maid*. Produced by Famous Players-Lasky, the film opened on Valentine’s Day at New York’s Strand Theater. It ran sixty-five minutes on five reels and was described as the most advertised film in the history of cinema up to that time. Such a high-profile production, with a familiar plot featuring Danites and polygamous intrigues, could no longer be justified by anti-Mormon sentiment; rather, motivation now came from
within the industry itself, as the film was a blatant attempt to capitalize on the success of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* two years earlier. The connection between the two films cannot be overemphasized, particularly in the fabricated connection between the Ku Klux Klan and the Danites; one intertitle even tells us that the Danites’ hooded costume (historically nonexistent) was the direct predecessor of the KKK’s. The strategy worked, as critics lauded the film and audiences flocked to it across the nation.

The Church could not ignore such an important production, but once again it found itself at an extreme disadvantage. Eastern States Mission President Walter Monson began the resistance when the film was first announced, but neither his nor anyone else’s work did anything but heighten interest. The film became extremely popular with anti-Mormon organizations like the National Reform Association and the National Anti-Mormon League. It continued to be shown publicly and privately across
the globe for at least three years and unquestionably represents the climax of the silent anti-Mormon films.36

Though perhaps nothing could match this in force or scope, other lesser productions followed. In late 1918, Fox released two films based on Zane Grey novels, *Riders of the Purple Sage* and its sequel *The Rainbow Trail*. This time Reed Smoot spearheaded the crusade, and although no results were reached in 1918, he renewed his efforts, with other prominent Latter-day Saints, over a 1921 re-release. This campaign seemed as doomed as the others until two Fox representatives approached Senator Smoot seeking his support in eliminating a 30 percent excise tax on motion pictures; the deal making evidently took all of five minutes, and the pictures’ removal was so complete that they are entirely lost today. The films were remade in 1925, 1931, and 1941 without any references to Mormonism, and in 1924 a film based on a Zane Grey novel with a positive stance on the Church, *The Heritage of the Desert*, also had its LDS elements excised.37

It is unlikely that producers now saw the Church as having political muscle. The disappearance of the American anti-Mormon film was most likely due to the subject’s loss of sensationalism, and negative references to Mormonism virtually disappeared from the screen. The anti-Mormon film would be given one last gasp in Europe, however, where Mormonism once more became a hot topic after the postwar return of American missionaries. In 1920 Germany released its only known anti-Mormon film, *The Mormon Uncle* (*Der Mormonenonkel*), of which virtually nothing else is known. Far better documented are two English films, *Trapped by the Mormons* and *Married to a Mormon*, released in March and April 1922 as part of Winifred Graham’s last desperate campaign against the Church. Both films came from the fledgling Master Films studio at Teddington, both featured lecherous missionaries defeated by monogamous heroes, and both were written by Frank Miller and produced and directed by H. B. Parkinson.

*Trapped by the Mormons* is often treated as the most important and damaging of the anti-Mormon films, [Image of a British broadside advertising *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922), with other offerings for the week. Richard Alan Nelson Collection, Perry Special Collections, BYU.]
though both descriptions better fit *A Mormon Maid*. Contemporary missionary reports, in fact, show that the film’s effect was primarily positive. Elder G. Osmond Hyde wrote home from Hull that it “was the best stroke of advertising that we have put forth since coming over here. In three evenings we let more people know that we are here than we could have done in three months at ordinary tracting from door to door.”

Similar reports came from various regions. In Australia, for instance, future Church leader Marion G. Romney saw *Trapped*, happily distributing tracts afterward. But in North America, Church leaders were less willing to rely on goodwill. Attempts to suppress the films in Canada in 1924 failed, but Senator Smoot was again successful in blocking their initial release in the United States. Though *Trapped by the Mormons* was re-released in England in 1928 as *The Mormon Peril*, it apparently never saw an American screen.

The anti-Mormon film was not extinct, but the lackluster success of these two projects certainly helped put it into remission. By the 1930s, Mormonism had outlived its sensationalism, and lurid depictions virtually disappeared from the page, stage, and screen. Following the example of Reed Smoot, Heber Grant, and others, Latter-day Saints had begun to actively foster a positive public image, some by producing movies of their own.

**INSTITUTIONAL AND INDEPENDENT FILMS**

**The Church Enters Filmmaking: *One Hundred Years of Mormonism***

The greatest legacy of the anti-Mormon films was, ironically, the fostering of an appreciation for motion pictures within the LDS Church hierarchy. The proceedings of the April 1912 general conference are illuminating in this regard, as nearly a dozen sermons, the most forcible from President Joseph F. Smith, touched on the subject. The Church was in fact already acting to take advantage of this new medium and gain a level platform with its attackers. Simultaneous with their various campaigns against the films of 1912, Joseph F. Smith, other Church leaders, and rank-and-file Latter-day Saints began investigating opportunities to put the Mormon story as they saw it on film.

Occasional short films had already depicted Utah subjects positively, or at least neutrally, which was virtually as good. Friendly travelogues and scenic pictures prepared an environment for filmmakers to create work with overtly pro-Mormon sentiments. The first of these came, appropriately, from Utah’s first native film company, the Rocky Mountain Moving Picture Company, formed in August 1908 in Salt Lake City. Among the firm’s first productions were scenic shots of local interest, including all
of the buildings on Temple Square. In the weekly meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on June 30, 1910, President Smith reported that “a man named Hutchinson [had] proposed the idea of illustrating the chief points in the history of the Church by means of moving pictures.” This was most likely S. W. Hutchinson, a director of the Rocky Mountain Company. The General Authorities agreed to pursue the project, but we have no further record of the venture. Other short films were undertaken in the early 1910s, including an unfinished historical picture called The Romance of Mormonism in 1912 and the completed The Romance of the Utah Pioneers in 1913, which became the first cinematic portrayal of an LDS handcart company.

In June 1912 the Church itself struck a deal with the Ellaye Motion Picture Company to make a huge film telling the Church’s full history. Ellaye’s president and general manager, Harry A. Kelly, gave the Church final cut approval in return for assistance and, presumably, endorsement. Soon, however, Ellaye claimed this stipulation was too limiting, though it also appears the company had run out of funds. It was replaced by the California-based Utah Moving Picture Company. The name One Hundred Years of Mormonism came from a popular Church textbook by John Henry Evans published for the 1905 centennial of Joseph Smith’s birth. The film was apparently not a direct adaptation, but the subject matter of the book and film were obviously very similar, following the Church from Joseph Smith’s infancy to the development of modern Utah. The scale of the production was massive, and with six reels running for ninety minutes the film was truly gigantic for its time, dwarfing prestige productions like A Victim of the Mormons.

One Hundred Years of Mormonism opened on Monday, February 3, 1913, at the Salt Lake Theatre in the largest premiere in the city’s history. Two other prints opened in San Francisco and Los Angeles on February 9, and the three prints traveled through the western states, each accompanied
by a live lecturer. Feedback resulted in some cuts and reshoots, including footage from the April 1913 general conference that was shot and added to the film with First Presidency approval. The film went into a limited general release in June, by which point it had grossed $25,000. The extent of its distribution is not clear, but trade journals report a states’ rights approach in the domestic market with London alone as the only probable foreign venue.

Contemporary reports on the film’s artistic merits were mixed: Audiences were reported to have burst into spontaneous applause, yet James E. Talmage recorded in his personal journal that it was “not a complete success” and contained “many crudities and historical inaccuracies.” Its faults notwithstanding, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* is unquestionably the most important LDS film of the silent era. LDS film historian David Jacobs has given three reasons for this status: It is “the only silent movie sanctioned by the Church as essentially authentic, the only film utilizing genuine relics from the pioneer trek, and the only picture drawing on the experience of still-living pioneers,” both as actors and otherwise. It has also been lost, undoubtedly one of the great tragedies of the First Wave. But in the late 1990s, Robert Starling, who was working as a producer for the Church’s Audiovisual Department, discovered a few minutes of *One Hundred Years* catalogued incorrectly in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. Though not a complete copy, this find constitutes arguably the most important and electrifying event in recent Mormon film history.

The Clawson Brothers

*One Hundred Years of Mormonism* influenced LDS filmmakers to build up the local film industry in a number of ways, resulting in both secular and religious productions. Its most important progeny was announced on December 20, 1913, when a young man named Chet Clawson wrote in the *Deseret Evening News* that he and his brother Shirl had received permission from the First Presidency to make a feature film based on the Book
The Clawson brothers would become the driving force of silent Mormon cinema, setting the stage for everything that has come since. If any one man deserves to be called the father of Mormon movies, it is Shirl Clawson.

The Clawsons decided to break the project, known as *The Story of the Book of Mormon*, into multiple films, and William A. Morton was contracted to write the first installment, *The Life of Nephi*. However, when the First Presidency approved this script the Clawsons evidently failed to pay the contracted $400. After two years of work and negotiations, Morton removed the Clawsons from the project and undertook to produce it himself, enlisting the help of Anton J. T. Sorensen, William J. Burns, and a few others, including a professional cameraman from California. The eventual result was a three-reel picture that premiered on October 25, 1915. After local showings, the film was lost; all that remain are thirty-nine hand-painted slides Sorensen used in an illustrated lecture. Morton and the others predicted lives of failure for the Clawson brothers, a future that fortunately did not materialize.

Shirl and Chet were the sons of Hirum Clawson, long associated with the Salt Lake Theatre, and grandchildren of Brigham Young through their mother, actress Emily Partridge Young; hence, they sprang from the most prominent dramatic family in the Church, with theatrical roots going back to the very first performance in Nauvoo. Shirl, whose full name was Shirley Young Clawson, consistently displayed more dramatic and cinematic interest than his brother Chet, or Chester, who tended more to the business affairs. It is possible that they were making film documents of the Church as early as 1910, but after *The Life of Nephi* fiasco, Shirl moved to California to work as a cameraman for Universal Pictures. He returned after just one
year, however, and the brothers again made the creation of Church films their full-time occupation. Joseph F. Smith evidently agreed to outfit them, making their works loosely Church-affiliated, and the Clawson or Deseret Film Company was soon established in the lower floor of the Lion House, where the Lion House Pantry Restaurant is now located. On April 9, 1916, during general conference, they did their first major filming, of Church leaders and the crowds at Temple Square. Two private screenings were held, and thus The Eighty-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints became the first truly official Church film. 19

Over the next decade, the Clawsons worked intensely, eventually moving to the basement of the Deseret News Building on South Temple and Main Street. They supplemented their religious work with advertisements, titles, and newsreels, but Church films remained their passion. They shot invaluable records of dozens of General Authorities on the streets, temple grounds, and in their offices and homes. They recorded Joseph F. Smith’s funeral, Boy Scout excursions, monument dedications, parades, conferences, athletic events, picnics, and dozens of other activities and scenic shots, in Salt Lake and elsewhere. Virtually nothing escaped their lens; they even filmed President Grant playing golf. 50

The Clawson brothers filmed events at the 17th Annual Track & Field Meet and Relay Carnival at BYU on April 29 and 30, 1927. The intertitle for this event reads, “Dashing Girls (50 Yards).” LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
For the most part, their films were not documentaries but actualities—short, unpretentious slices of life contained within a single shot. Because of this practice, as well as their two-man-studio setup, the Clawson brothers of the 1920s rather resemble France’s Lumière brothers, who are credited with the world’s first public film screening on December 28, 1895. Particularly in their aesthetic simplicity combined with documentary richness—and because they, like the Lumières’ employees, operated as cameramen, laboratory technicians, and distributors for their own pictures—the Clawsons’ operation was quite similar to the Lumières’. Usually the Church Historian’s office describes a Clawson picture with words like “President Joseph F. Smith (close up) in front of temple, removes hat, then glasses,” or “Stephen L Richards in Sunday School office; George D. Pyper in and out.” Obviously, despite their apparent nonchalance, the Clawsons, like the Lumières’ cameramen, were directing their subjects, treating them as actors, often with multiple takes.

Perhaps the least clear aspect of the Clawsons’ work is what they did with their films, particularly in terms of distribution and exhibition. We know they used film for archival purposes, as this was mentioned in connection with the April 1916 general conference, but records also refer to such films’ public relations potential. In a 1923 Improvement Era article, Harold Jenson mentioned being “engaged with Clawson Brothers, in taking moving pictures . . . which moving pictures were shown in Salt Lake City.” It is possible that this particular piece, on flooding near Willard and Farmington, was done in the Clawsons’ capacity as agents for Pathé news, but it shows that films were indeed exhibited locally. Given the Pathé connection, however, it seems highly likely that the Clawsons themselves saw their films not as actualities but as newsreels, pieces that would not only cause a thrill of recognition in their viewers but also help bolster
their faith as well. The films probably served three purposes: archival, commercial, and religious. By watching the prophet or Church activities, contemporary Latter-day Saints, paying admission at commercial theaters, could become galvanized to help build up the kingdom; these films also gave future generations the opportunity to view a bygone era in a manner never before possible.

**Institutional Broadcasting Begins**

Church broadcasting began with radio, which quickly helped foster a culture of officially sanctioned audiovisual media, including cinema. Although radio lacked film’s visual component, it eventually helped lead to the increased use, institutionally and independently, of media such as film and, later, television. Not only have many films since the Third Wave been created specifically for television, but electronic media—including radio—paved the way for the Church’s search for wholly controllable cinematic distribution outlets, including VHS, closed-circuit broadcasts, and satellite.

The Church’s interest in radio grew naturally out of the organization’s rich publishing history, particularly with periodicals. In 1921 the managers of the *Deseret News* decided to launch a station, and after major difficulties in building and hauling equipment up to a tin shack atop their roof, they achieved their first official broadcast on May 6, 1922. The infant station’s call letters were KZN, presumably for “Zion.” Even though the station began with a single daily half-hour broadcast, it sparked a radio craze in Salt Lake City as people, who now had something to listen to, went out and bought receivers. In 1924 the newspaper sold the station to father and son team F. W. and John Cope, who renamed it KFPT. The Church assumed majority ownership in 1925, permanently changing the call letters to KSL, for “Salt Lake.” That October KSL broadcast general conference, and Church involvement with radio had begun.52

**All Faces West**

After World War I, the initial excitement from *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* had dissipated, but it seems that gradually more individuals, perhaps inspired by the consistent work of the Clawsons, began making amateur or promotional films in favor of the Church. In 1923 the Church itself proposed making another larger-than-life feature, although both this and a feature proposed later by the Clawsons were never completed. Then, on March 24, 1928, the Church announced a deal with the Pioneer Film Company to create an epic of the pioneer journey tentatively called *The Exodus of the New World*, although the final title would be *All Faces*
West. George Pyper wrote the screenplay, and Levi Edgar Young served as historical advisor. Principal photography wrapped by November, and the film appeared to have all the ingredients for success: the blessing of the General Authorities on the one hand and big-name Hollywood stars Ben Lyon and Marie Prevost as the romantic leads on the other. Pioneer began publicizing a second, secular feature and purchased twelve acres in the Sugar House area of Salt Lake for a permanent studio, loudly promising to bolster the local economy for years to come.

In the meantime, however, the nature of movies had changed completely with the coming of sound. The Jazz Singer, the first great talkie, had its Salt Lake City premiere on May 19, 1928, and although the Church had been investigating sound film for years, its arrival caught the Pioneer Film Company completely off guard. All Faces West would have to become a talking picture, a process that was happening to various films across the world. In November Pioneer began advertising it as such, and in December they started selling stock to raise additional funds. The necessary amount was not forthcoming, however, and eventually hopes for synchronization had to be abandoned. Accompanied by an orchestra, the film premiered privately around Valentine’s Day 1929, opening to the public on March 2. It ran for one week, a typical run, but a national release was slipping out of reach. By September the company went into suspension, and the film is lost today. All Faces West was presumably no worse artistically than One Hundred Years of Mormonism, but it had the misfortune of being released at the time of greatest upheaval in the history of global cinema. A great many films across the world suffered a similar fate.53

The End of an Era

This loss, however, was only a minor setback for Mormon cinema compared with other events. The Clawson brothers had continued working prodigiously for thirteen years, by this time creating a priceless visual record of the Church and region. Their skill and inventiveness as a two-person film studio has been largely unmatched in the history of cinema. In 1929 they were embarking on yet another feature and were apparently in the process of converting to synchronized sound. Their basement office was a complete film studio, including laboratory film processing equipment. It was also essentially their library, the walls covered with shelves of canned reels, many of them the only copies. The entrance was by an iron staircase that went to the street level, with an inward-opening metal door at the bottom; near this was a small washroom with a skylight grill opening in the sidewalk overhead.
On October 23, 1929, both men were working in the studio when a rewinding machine Shirl was using emitted a spark that landed in a basket full of highly flammable nitrate-based film. Fire erupted immediately. After a moment attempting to extinguish the flames both men ran to the exit but the door had swollen shut. Chet broke the door’s glass window and the incoming air caused an explosion that filled the studio. Both men ducked into the washroom, then Chet ran through the flames and leaped through the broken window, saying later he felt literally shot through the small opening by a power greater than his own. By the time the fire department arrived and broke through the skylight to Shirl, he was only slightly burned but had suffocated. Later the fire chief reported that if it had been regular carbon-based smoke he would have survived, but the nitrate produced a poisonous gas. His own films had killed him. Chet was burned terribly, nearly losing his ears. He never made another motion picture.54

The fire also obviously destroyed a great deal of their work—Chet, the businessman, estimated $10,000 worth of it. What survives generally came from other sources, much of it discovered in odd locations in the ensuing decades, most notably in 1948 when Frank Wise was able to compile a collection of found footage into the film *Latter-day Saint Leaders: Past and Present*.55 With luck, more of the Clawsons’ footage and the other lost films of the silent era will yet be found. Still, the detail of their surviving prints—records of the personalities and daily functioning of the Church for two decades—constitutes an invaluable legacy, one that, for all the increased pervasiveness of film and media, has never quite been repeated in the Church. The Clawsons’ era remains a singular moment in LDS history.
Gordon B. Hinckley, right, of the Church Radio, Publicity and Mission Literature Committee, examining a 35mm film with his former mission president, Elder Joseph F. Merrill, center, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Hinckley and a cadre of other young multitasking enthusiasts were responsible for pioneering various forms of media and for establishing a culture in which slide shows, radio plays, exhibits, and cinema would be used in Church education and publicity. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
The Second Wave: Home Cinema (1929–1953)

The Second Wave differed from the First in various respects. For instance, by the 1930s the global film industry was well past its primitive pioneer era, and, within Mormonism, the increased sophistication of Second Wave films reflects this progress. In addition, technical advances (principally sound, but also color) renewed enthusiasm about the medium, both generally and among the Latter-day Saints. While this optimism did propel institutional and independent Mormon filmmaking toward some major projects, the decade of the 1930s—and to a lesser extent the 1940s—has generally been described for its lack of Mormon film production. Such a perception, however, does not give full credit to changes and growth in underlying areas of Mormon cinema that created a sustainable cinematic culture that would last throughout the ensuing years. Indeed, the 1930s and 1940s were decades in which both the mainstream film industry and the LDS Church itself reinvented the relationship between Mormonism and cinema.

Due to Hollywood’s adoption of the Hays Production Code and the aforementioned loss of Mormonism’s sensationalism, mainstream depictions of Mormonism changed radically to the positive in the 1930s. But an even more important and enduring change in the Second Wave was the domestication of film by the LDS Church and within Mormon culture. This was a time when all aspects of the medium—distribution, exhibition, and ultimately production—were integrated into Mormon social life and institutionalized by the Church itself. After these decades it would be impossible to understand or imagine The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the Mormon experience apart from its films.

The term “Home Cinema” is borrowed from Home Literature, a genre that appeared about 1880 when Latter-day Saints began to consciously develop their own literary tradition that glorified locally made (generally in Utah) didactic writing. But Home Cinema harks back not just to Home Literature of the 1890s but to the Home Industry effort of the 1850s, a movement that emphasized domestic production among Latter-day Saints over trafficking with Gentiles. In the First Wave, Church leaders had been more than satisfied to outsource their major film productions to professional firms, but in this era—with the demise of the anti-Mormon film, the financial restrictions of the Great Depression, and the improving public image of the Church at large—they apparently felt confident in slowing
Key Films of the Second Wave

• *The Message of the Ages* (1930, USA, stage director George D. Pyper/film director unknown, length unknown). Short film resulting from a failed attempt to film the Church’s entire centennial pageant.

• *Corianton: A Story of Unholy Love* (1931, USA, director Wilfred North, about 90 minutes). Large-scale theatrical adaptation of the Orestes Bean play based on a Book of Mormon story.

• *Brigham Young* (1940, USA, director Henry Hathaway, 114 minutes). First large-scale positive Hollywood film on Mormon subject matter, significant for its shift from the anti-Mormon films of the silent era.

• *Where the Saints Have Trod* (1947, USA, director Frank S. Wise, 70 minutes). The largest film made at Deseret Film Productions, this was the Church’s flagship film for the 1947 Utah state centennial.

• *Church Welfare in Action* (1948, USA, director Eric Larson, 30 minutes) and *The Lord’s Way* (1948, USA, director Judge Whitaker, 22 minutes). These two films, produced in California through a cooperative effort between the Church and Walt Disney, were crucial in the decision to create a motion picture department at BYU.


• The temple endowment film (1955, USA, director Harold I. Hansen, length unknown). This first introduction of film to temple worship revolutionized LDS temple construction and placement and, ultimately, Church demographics across the globe.
down, thinking smaller, and establishing production in-house. Production efforts were modest and depended on a few multitasking personalities such as Frank S. Wise and future Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, men who took an artisanal approach to filmmaking’s complex technical processes. Indeed, by recognizing film’s industrial core, we can see Home Cinema as the last vital manifestation of the Home Industry movement begun over eighty years earlier. With the coming of the railroad and the growth of Salt Lake City as a regional crossroads, the economic home industries inevitably waned by the close of the nineteenth century, but the cultural home industry of film extended into the twentieth century attempts by Latter-day Saints to produce domestically, cultivate their own identity, and resist outside influences.

With the fire on Wednesday, October 23, 1929, the Church lost the Clawsons, and with Black Tuesday six days later on October 29, it soon lost what little financial ability it had to replace them. The decade of the 1930s was therefore the only period in which the Church had no official film-making organization. Instead, missionaries, Church employees, and others developed innovative and influential new approaches to making and using film and other media. Through developments in filmstrips, radio, and an internal motion picture distribution and exhibition network, the Church in this period not only created a permanent outlet for Mormon films that has remained in place until the present, but formed the infrastructure for an entire internal film industry. It would be upon these footings that an institutional Church film studio could be established at BYU in 1953.

**Mainstream Depictions of Mormons**

**A Kinder Hollywood under the Production Code**

In the Second Wave, Church leaders did not feel the same compelling need they did in the First Wave to produce positive films about the faith in order to counter prejudicial mainstream depictions. To the delight of Latter-day Saints, Hollywood would do this for them. American movies underwent significant content changes with the introduction of the Hays Production Code in 1930. LDS Church leaders, like many across the country, had spoken out against Hollywood indecency since at least the Fatty Arbuckle scandal that erupted in 1921–22. That scandal had sensationalized the allegedly immoral lifestyle of movie stars and was a catalyst for a nationwide conservative backlash against Hollywood. The Production Code was a manifestation of this and put in place industry-wide self-censorship
to avoid the likelihood of stricter government regulation of movies. By March 1930, American filmmakers had removed most of what was deemed immoral and indecent in Hollywood’s product, much to LDS Church leaders’ satisfaction. Among the regulations the studios adopted were stipulations against misrepresenting faiths or ministers of religion. Certain stereotypes suddenly evaporated from American cinema—among them, the lascivious Mormon elder, the power-hungry Mormon patriarch, and those ticket-selling nubile victims of forced polygamy. It became nearly impossible to treat Mormonism from any of the standard exploitative angles. The only apparent anomaly of any importance was a low-budget sexploitation potboiler called Polygamy based on the modern polygamist colony at Short Creek, Arizona. This was released without approval of the censors in 1936 and was later re-released twice, first as Child Marriage (possibly 1939) and again as Illegal Wives (1945).

The Code, however, also nixed positive depictions of polygamy and organizations that endorsed it, thus essentially removing any depiction of Latter-day Saints—positive or negative—from the screen. When they did appear in mainstream films, Latter-day Saints became something of a cipher, more generally referred to by their geographic origin than their religious beliefs. Monogram’s western The Man from Utah (1934) epitomized this new mode of representing Mormons cinematically. In it a young John Wayne plays John Weston, a straight-laced hero who is continually referred to by his state of origin, though the film never mentions this state’s dominant religion. He saves the day, in part, because of his sobriety, apparently a reference to the Church’s increasingly prominent Word of Wisdom. Throughout the film, Wayne’s upright character is a far cry from the vampiric missionaries of the previous decade. Other films of the 1930s were more or less variations on this theme, with Mormonism a covert yet positive force. Newsreels and travelogues began to feature positive mentions of the Church in the 1930s, especially regarding the development of the Church’s welfare efforts during the Depression.

Occasional productions featured minor characters who were overtly Latter-day Saints, but more often wild rumors circulated about potential large scale Mormon-themed productions with names such as E. B. Derr, Tom Keene, James Cruze, and even Cecil B. DeMille attached. Finally, in 1938 an independent western called The Mormon Conquest premiered in Kanab, Utah, though it evidently never showed again. Lost today, it remains one of the great mysteries of the Second Wave. In the ensuing years of the Second Wave, Hollywood films with Mormon subjects tended to conflate the Church with Utah and to praise the all-American qualities of this beleaguered religion. Mormons were remade into representative
Americans and their history an example of American values triumphing in the West. This happened most successfully with two westerns—one a great commercial success, the other a great critical success in American film history.

The Major Features: 1940–1950

Without question Twentieth Century Fox’s *Brigham Young* (1940) was the highest-profile film on Mormonism yet. Church historians and authorities, including Heber J. Grant himself, were involved extensively in the project. *Brigham Young*’s plot follows the Saints from their persecutions in Nauvoo to the establishment of Great Salt Lake City. Though this technically constituted the chief storyline, a disproportionate amount of screen time was spent on a love affair between the Mormon scout Jonathan Kent and a non-Mormon girl named Zina Webb. These romantic roles were played by Tyrone Power and Linda Darnell, not coincidentally the studio’s top stars at the time. *Brigham Young* was played by the unknown

Vincent Price as Joseph Smith on trial in a scene from *Brigham Young* (1940). Behind him, *center*, sit romantic leads Tyrone Power and Linda Darnell; Dean Jagger as Brigham Young waits behind them ready to make his presence known. Courtesy Perry Special Collections, BYU.
Dean Jagger, a stage actor making his film debut. The film was directed by Henry Hathaway but is generally considered a product of Fox's chief Daryl Zanuck, who was so committed to it that it was one of the last big-budget films before the war, with production costs of $1,850,000.

President Grant released a heartfelt statement of gratitude after a private screening, and the film opened August 23, 1940, as mentioned earlier, with the largest premiere in American history to that point. Though the war obscured some box office information, it appears that the film grossed about $4 million. On the eastern seaboard, the subtitle Frontiersman was added to downplay the religious elements, and it was consistently viewed as a parable on modern Judaism more than a denunciation of nineteenth-century mobocracy. In the ensuing decades, some Latter-day Saints have come to disapprove of the film’s dramatic license, but Brigham Young must be seen in its historical context. After decades of disappointing and failed projects and with the silent anti-Mormon films fresh in many minds, Brigham Young, even with its fictional elements, was a public relations victory of the highest order.

The only other mainstream cinematic depiction of Latter-day Saints that decade was MGM’s 1946 western Bad Bascomb. Falling between a prestige picture and a B-film, this production featured Wallace Beery as the titular bad man who stows away in a Mormon wagon train to escape a posse. Eventually he is beguiled by a young Mormon orphan played by child star Margaret O’Brien, and he turns against his partner to save the Mormons. Though essentially unknown today, Bad Bascomb reaffirmed the new positive, if doctrinally vague, depiction of Latter-day Saints. Though actual religion hardly plays into the picture at all, casting the popular O’Brien as the Mormon girl who wins over the baddest outlaw in the country said something indeed about the new social respectability Latter-day Saints enjoyed after World War II.

It is less surprising, then, to find Mormons featuring prominently in one of the most humanistic films ever made, John Ford’s Wagon Master (1950). Although its scale could not equal that of Brigham Young, it deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest of Mormon films. After the war, Ford’s new independent company, Argosy Pictures, formed a contract with RKO to create three films: The Fugitive (1947) and She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949), both with defined subject matter, and a film called Wagon Master on a yet unspecified subject. While shooting Yellow Ribbon in central Utah, Ford’s son Patrick, a screenwriter, met some LDS horsemen, which led to the Wagon Master story being created around the Hole in the Rock expedition that some of the horsemen’s ancestors had participated in. Though Patrick and his cowriter, Frank Nugent, had to
research Mormonism intensively, John Ford seemed to understand the Mormons instinctively. “These are the people I want,” he said. His depiction was accurate. By contrast, the Mormons’ odd Puritan outfits were the invention of RKO chief Howard Hughes, who held the purse strings. The story, set in the 1880s, tells of a southward-bound pioneer company, their non-Mormon wagon masters, and the misfits, outcasts, and outlaws they encounter along the way. The traditional cinematic allegations against the Church are raised and thrown out immediately, as the Mormon leader Elder Wiggs states, “We’re not a big party, son. We’re just a handful of people sent out to mark the trail and prepare the ground for those who will come after us,” thus humanizing the entire Mormon camp. This explicitly equates them with the other downtrodden groups they encounter, most notably the Navajo. As one critic observed, “Probably the best rendering of [Ford’s] cultural equivalence comes in Wagon Master, when the Mormons and the Native Americans each confront and tolerate the mysterious other, locking arms and circling a flickering campfire in a Navajo dance.”

A small film by Ford’s standards, Wagon Master was shot in late 1949.
and premiered May 6, 1950. Despite favorable reviews, it met only modest box office success in America, as Ford expected. It was quickly praised in Europe, however, and has since become regarded as one of Ford’s greatest, if smallest, films. Within Mormonism, Wagon Master remains a largely undiscovered diamond.

In contrast to the success of films like Brigham Young and Wagon Master, smaller-scale productions simply could not get off the ground. This was true not only for independent films made by the Latter-day Saints themselves but also for Edward Finney, a veteran Hollywood producer who was not LDS. In the spring of 1950, he announced a six-reel documentary about a reenactment of the Mormon Battalion by the Sons of Utah Pioneers. Called simply The Mormon Battalion, this film was made from his personal finances and depicted the “troops” marching and celebrating in San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Bernardino, with speeches by government and Church leaders, including President George Albert Smith, who would die less than a year later. Finney gave a few showings and anticipated extensive interest from the Mormon communities in Utah and California, but despite Church participation Finney soon felt indifference from Mormon and non-Mormon viewers alike—later reporting that Church members did not even attend his screenings. He thus decided to expend no further effort but had the prescience to carefully store the print and later donate a copy to the Church. Finney’s effort is noteworthy as an attempt outside of the institutional Church—and even Mormon culture—to create an unpretentious artisanal film within a domestic, if ad hoc, distribution system.

These positive Hollywood Mormon films suggest that Mormonism, by way of popular cinema, was gradually beginning to be domesticated into mainstream culture—at least within popular mythology of the American West.

Mormons and the Mainstream Industry

At Home in the Industry

During the two decades of the Second Wave, many Latter-day Saints also made themselves at home in the film and entertainment industry. The Church was larger in southern California than in any other area outside the Mormon heartland. Many Church members worked in the entertainment industry, and some (like Wetzel Whitaker) would eventually become major participants in Church-related filmmaking efforts. Some continued to write and direct, but others began to gain prominence in lesser known
areas of filmmaking, such as Lionel Banks, head of Columbia Studios’ art department for seven years, or Nancy Bakke, who designed costumes for MGM. Most prominent among these was Eric Larson, one of Disney’s leading animators for several decades. Character actor Moroni Olsen was among the best-known LDS thespians to enter the field in this period, and Laraine Day and Rhonda Fleming gained national prominence as leading ladies in mid- to high-level films.60

Similar to Harvey Fletcher and Philo Farnsworth in the First Wave, some Latter-day Saints in the Second Wave made careers within the technical and administrative side of the film and broadcasting industries. Rosel H. Hyde worked his way up the ranks in the new Federal Communications Commission during the 1940s; he was twice appointed FCC Chairman, by Eisenhower in 1953 and again by Johnson in 1966. His religion occasionally came under fire—tobacco companies cried foul, for instance, when their advertisements were banned during his second term—but it generally won him respect. He oversaw much of the growth of American television and satellite networks, as well as the introduction of color signals and the creation of the National Television Systems Committee (NTSC) video standard, which has defined video production and editing in the Western Hemisphere for generations.61

The developing film industry was not restricted to Hollywood, to the United States, or to traditional narrative films during these decades. At least one Mormon who began his career in this period would contribute importantly to film traditions running counter to mainstream cinema. In 1945 Colin Low, a young LDS animator, joined the fledgling National Film Board (NFB) of Canada; in retrospect he could be described as one of the most important Mormon filmmakers in the history of cinema. A native of the Mormon colonies in Alberta, Low progressed through the ranks in both animated and documentary films within the legendary Unit B, the NFB’s vanguard organization. Low’s first documentary, Corral (1954), set on the Mormon ranches in Cochran, garnered international recognition and awards.

Low’s contributions to animation and large-format filmmaking were remarkable, but it is perhaps most appropriate here to describe his consistent charitable worldview exhibited through his social documentaries. These identified social problems, focused on underprivileged minorities, and even allowed such groups to make their own films in their own voices. Notable in this regard was the Fogo Island series (Winds of Fogo [1970], A Memo from Fogo [1972], etc.), twenty-eight films produced and sometimes directed by Low as part of the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle program. Challenge for Change used film in local communities as an
instrument for social change. A film depicting the people and problems of a community would be shown to that community to facilitate constructive criticism about the issues it depicted.

Over the course of his sixty-year career, Low demonstrated an understanding that filmmaking is a stewardship, an empowerment that requires the filmmaker to strive to bless and even empower others. Low’s innovative and award-winning work has an aesthetic deeply informed by Mormon theology, and the lack of critical appreciation among Latter-day Saints for his work is astounding. Low has been broadly recognized as a pioneer, but ironically not among Mormons.  

Independent Mormon Films

In the Second Wave, Mormon-themed films by Latter-day Saints unfortunately found little commercial success, akin to the absolute failure of Edward Finney’s *The Mormon Battalion* and even the lukewarm reception given *Wagon Master*, a film made by one of the most popular directors in the world. It would be many years before positive films on Mormonism would be commercially viable. It was not until the Fourth Wave and the ubiquity of television, for instance, that independently produced documentaries about the Mormon experience found commercial success. And it was not until the Fifth Wave that the same proved true of independently produced narrative films. Indeed, the Second Wave actually began with the complete failure of yet another Mormon-made independent theatrical feature film, *Corianton*.

Corianton

At the outset of the Second Wave, events like the coming of sound and the prospect of the Pioneer Film Company’s studio in Salt Lake City must have infused optimism into prospective Mormon filmmakers. It was apparently on this momentum that one group announced the production of a large-scale adaptation of Book of Mormon material, *Corianton*. The film was the brainchild of Lester Park, who had been prominent in Utah’s film industry for more than two decades. In 1929 he took the lesson of *All Faces West* to heart and determined to create not only the first talking Mormon picture but a musical spectacular. Hence, like many producers of the time, he turned to the stage, deciding to adapt the 1902 play *Corianton* by Orestes Utah Bean. The play itself was adapted from an 1889 B. H. Roberts story published in a Church periodical as one of the first contributions to the Home Literature movement. All three versions of
the story fictionalize two Book of Mormon stories: Corianton’s mission to the Zoramites, wherein he is seduced and later repents, and his father Alma’s encounter with the anti-Christ Korihor around the same time.

Park saw this as the ideal property to usher in the sound era within Mormonism, and in late 1929 he and his brothers formed the Delaware-based Corianton Corporation and proceeded to raise capital and accrue talent. Park was producing with Wilfred North directing, and Bean himself was on board. The greatest attraction for the film—what the Deseret News called its prime “movie star”—was the Tabernacle Choir, secured after extensive negotiations with the General Authorities.  

In addition, the film’s scope was ambitious, to say the least, with massive sets by archeological expert Joseph Physioc, a huge cast, and so forth. The Roman costumes are somewhat revealing, emphasizing the fact that Corianton’s story is virtually the only one in the Book of Mormon with any sex in it. The film’s subtitle was changed from An Aztec Romance to A Story of Unholy Love to promote this same provocative element. Loaded with sex and scripture, Corianton had all the ingredients for a huge success, at least according to the formula exemplified in recent scriptural epics like Cecil B. DeMille’s 1923 The Ten Commandments.

Thus the Park brothers were armed with the tried and true formula of the “sex and sand” biblical epic of the 1920s and the novelty of a soundtrack featuring articulate stage dialogue and Mormonism’s most prominent musical group, but what they failed to foresee was the depth of the Great Depression and its effects on their internal finances. Despite their claims in the papers, the company was troubled financially and appeals for funds proved fruitless. The film missed its initial goal of an April 6, 1930, release, and while company stock was suspended in May 1930, by late 1931 the film was ready for screening. Corianton premiered on October 1 in Salt Lake City.
Lake City and ran for at least two weeks, evidently to enthusiastic crowds. However, the Corianton Corporation ran into trouble in New York State for mingling stockholder’s money with a separate enterprise belonging to board member Napoleon Hill. Stock was suspended on April 4, 1932, for failure to pay taxes, and by 1933 Bean had the Parks in court, the result being that he was jailed for five days for contempt of court. Though Lester Park surely did not purposely commit fraud, the public embarrassment—and legal trappings—caused the film to be completely withdrawn and swept under the rug. As with Riders of the Purple Sage, this removal was absolute: all negatives, prints, and other materials disappeared so completely that most historians have claimed Corianton was never even completed. In 2004, however, BYU Motion Picture archivist James D’Arc located a 16mm print and has digitally restored it, one of the most exciting developments in Mormon film history.64

The Parks’ Corianton and Finney’s The Mormon Battalion almost twenty years later both demonstrated that in the Second Wave there was not enough interest to support a commercial Mormon film industry; as mentioned, it would not be until 2000 that such films would start to be financially viable. Although Corianton was not the first Mormon feature film made completely independently of the Church—a title that goes to The Life of Nephi in 1915—it was nevertheless a milestone in the history of Mormon film. Hopefully, as the restored version brings Corianton once more to public knowledge, a more appropriate critical appraisal will assess its aesthetic merits and place it within what has by now become a long and varied tradition of adapting the Book of Mormon to the silver screen.

Home Movies as Home Cinema

One way to understand the dynamics of the Second Wave is to see a general movement by Latter-day Saints away from large film productions intended for mass commercial exhibition toward small, inexpensive productions intended for local congregations or home viewing. The work of amateur filmmakers, though far from flashy, constitutes an important hallmark of the Second Wave. Amateur filmmakers of this period would imitate the Clawson brothers of the First Wave, and their experiments yielded new approaches to film that have resonated throughout Mormonism in the ensuing years.

Amateur films of this period, somewhat like the Clawsons’ earlier work, were generally short visual artifacts without soundtracks, focused around the filmmakers’ personal activities or geographical locations, and were intended mostly for private exhibition. Some were genuine home movies as we understand the term today, including important footage
shot by the adult children of J. Reuben Clark, Anthony Ivins, and David O. McKay—the last including a privileged look at the Swiss Temple dedication in 1954. On a trip to Yellowstone Park, Reed Smoot’s daughter filmed him feeding a bear. In contrast, other Saints made quite polished productions, such as two silent films on pioneers and modern temples shown at the Brooklyn Ward on March 30 and 31, 1936. Mormon film enthusiasts of this period were remarkably willing to make amateur movies that they believed would serve Church objectives—at their own cost and entirely without Church oversight or support.

Among these was James H. Moyle, who became president of the Eastern States Mission in 1929. He quickly began a groundbreaking public relations campaign that would eventually influence such projects throughout the entire Church. Primary among these efforts was a 16mm moving picture of ancient American ruins shot by Moyle himself for use in presenting the Book of Mormon. Missionary Joseph Smith Peery came under Moyle’s influence, and upon his 1933 release he purchased a car and a camera and traveled to Church history sites in an effort to make a film that could be used throughout the Church, although Depression era finances kept David A. Smith of the Presiding Bishopric from distributing it.

Peery and Moyle were not alone in sensing the potential of film for Church purposes. Many others worked independently of one another in applying film to Mormonism. Principal among these were Wilford C. Wood, a well-known LDS historian and collector who began shooting silent 16mm footage to augment his work on historic sites, and LaMar Williams, a young man who began by shooting events such as the laying of the Idaho Falls Temple cornerstone in 1940. From the 1930s into the 1950s, other amateur cinematographers shot footage of many Mormon subjects: the entire construction process of the chapel in Washington D.C. from 1930 to 1933; Church leaders in Hawaii, the eastern United States, and elsewhere; missionaries and members in South Africa, Japan, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Sweden; Harry S. Truman visiting BYU; a longitudinal record of a Maori congregation in New Zealand; and other events.

It is interesting to note that during the Second Wave more people were working unofficially than were working officially within the Church to create motion pictures for LDS public relations purposes, a trend that has possibly continued to the present. This was also true within the realm of radio, although the Church continued to develop KSL. Developments by the institutional Church and independently operating members continued to expand Mormonism’s media infrastructure, which in turn would become a significant factor in the Church’s eventual return to film production.
In 1930, at the very outset of the Second Wave, President Heber J. Grant personally shifted the focus of Church filmmaking from mammoth commercial productions in the mold of *All Faces West* to much more modest fare that could be shown outside the marketplace, in Church meetinghouses, to an audience already versed in the tenets of LDS doctrine. The Church’s centennial that year provided the perfect opportunity to do so. It occasioned positive attention from various newsreel companies, and Church members were equally sanguine about using film as part of the celebration. B. H. Roberts, who had of course created the source material for *Corianton*, “dreamed of a major motion picture with a script built upon one or more of the epic civilizations portrayed in the *Book of Mormon*.” Roberts was also a great proponent of Church historical pageants—an

The Salt Lake Tabernacle in full regalia, including a specially built stage, for the Church’s 1930 centennial performance of *The Message of the Ages*. The well-established tradition of Mormon pageantry made film a natural outlet for historical commemoratives. Attempts to adequately illuminate the Tabernacle for filming failed. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
event he held at the Joseph Smith farm in Palmyra in 1923 had eventually led to the creation of the pageant at the Hill Cumorah—and it was another historical pageant that President Grant would turn to in 1930.

As part of the centennial celebrations that year, Grant authorized the production of a large-scale pageant called *The Message of the Ages*, directed by George Pyper, and staged inside the Tabernacle itself. This event, which was presented around the April conference, was a tremendous success, prompting Grant to transform it into a movie that all the Church and world could see. Grant had long advocated the use of technology to build goodwill toward the Church, particularly since the 1912 anti-Mormon films, and he now became excited by the new technologies for motion pictures that made possible both color and synchronous sound.

Color cinematography was cutting-edge technology, and painstaking efforts were made inside the Tabernacle until the Technicolor technicians convinced Grant there simply wasn’t enough light for the massive three-strip process. Rather than give up, he moved the entire production outdoors to the steps of the State Capitol Building where portions, though not the entire production, were shot in color with synchronous sound, thus making it the first LDS sound film. It was distributed as a Pathé newsreel but probably proved prohibitively expensive to show in LDS meetinghouses outfitted for silent projection alone. Consequently, it joined *All Faces West* as an ambitious project to promote Mormonism that achieved only lukewarm results.

In 1931 and again in 1934, sound footage was shot of General Authorities addressing the camera, along with the first known footage of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but this too proved an unwieldy method, and official Church efforts at motion picture production halted for more than fifteen years, though President Grant remained proactive throughout the period.67
Mormon broadcasting developed on several fronts in the Second Wave. At Brigham Young University, the physics department had been fostering student interest in radio since the 1920s, culminating in T. Earl Pardoe’s creation of KBYU in 1939, the first collegiate radio station west of Chicago. Experiencing significant growing pains, the station continued to develop throughout the 1940s until it legitimized itself to the administration and became a permanent BYU institution. Meanwhile, the Church’s fledgling radio station in Salt Lake City, KSL, expanded its Church-related programming beginning in the late 1930s under the direction of Gordon B. Hinckley. Hinckley created extensive series such as *The Fullness of Times* (begun in 1941), a nineteen-hour history of the Church that he described as the most comprehensive radio program ever made by a church. Others produced radio programs as well, but the most important broadcaster would soon become the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

In 1929 KSL became affiliated with NBC, and on Monday, July 15, at 3:00 p.m., it began broadcasting programs with music by the Choir and spoken thoughts—initially just announcements—by various hosts. By June 1930 this position was taken over by future Apostle Richard L. Evans, and the broadcast, now at CBS, finally took the form of *Music and the Spoken Word* in 1936. This weekly program has continued uninterrupted on both radio and television and today is the longest-running program in the history of both media. Because of its longevity and its immense broadcast range, it is also undoubtedly the most important broadcast program in the history of the Church; for millions of people across the globe the Mormon Tabernacle Choir is the Church’s most recognizable symbol.

With such extensive experience in audio broadcasting, it was not difficult for the Church—KSL in particular—to make the transition to television after World War II. At the April 1948 general conference, a signal was sent by wire to nine sets around Temple Square—hence “thousands saw television for the first time.” Broadcast television began in Utah that same month and was immediately put to use by Church members: In May Primary General President Adele Cannon Howells adapted the radio program *The Children’s Friend of the Air*, begun in 1946, to television, calling it *Junior Council*. This weekly program, which lasted until at least 1954, featured, like the radio version, a procession of local children saying hello, displaying their pets, and discussing good morals. It was not until June 1, 1949, that KSL-TV officially went on the air, and general conference was
publicly telecast for the first time that October, marking yet another new era in Church communications.71

At BYU, meanwhile, prospects for television and motion pictures were slowly moving forward. Since the 1920s, faculty had been interested in filmstrips and motion pictures; in 1933 they purchased their first 16mm camera and shot their first footage—of a football game, appropriately. That same year BYU had the rare honor of purchasing the first roll of color 16mm film produced by the Eastman Kodak Company. All of these factors led many people to push for television and film instruction, and in 1952 new university president Ernest L. Wilkinson appointed a Radio and Television Committee. Not only did this eventually lead to the creation of KBYU television as an important outlet for Church films, but more
immediately it helped create the atmosphere that would lead to the establishment of the Motion Picture Department in January 1953.

Home Media: Filmstrips

The signature innovation for LDS media in the Second Wave was the filmstrip. While somewhat quaint today, this medium was revolutionary in its day, quickly proving its effectiveness and becoming a dominant instructional medium for both members and prospective converts. Unlike conventional movies, filmstrips were cheaply produced and could be exhibited through small and relatively inexpensive projectors easily transported by teachers or missionaries for both home and church settings. This visual medium became so central to the missionary program, Sunday School, and other Church organizations during the Second Wave that it would be completely natural for Latter-day Saints to graduate to using motion pictures for the same purposes once the technology became fiscally practical.

A cousin to motion pictures, filmstrips actually grew out of a common ancestor, the illustrated magic lantern lectures that had been an enormously popular Victorian entertainment and lecture method. By the 1930s, when some LDS missionaries, such as James Moyle, were beginning to dabble in motion pictures, others were virtually the last people still
using actual magic lanterns. The lanterns were incredibly bulky and heavy machines that used large and fragile glass slides, so it is not surprising that throughout the 1910s and 1920s missionaries in Iceland (1911), the Eastern States (1913), England (1921), California (1923), and elsewhere had therefore begun ad hoc efforts aimed at using the much more economical alternative of 35mm filmstrips, advancing the images one frame at a time. These 35mm filmstrips proved so successful they were adopted on a Church-wide level on October 18, 1930, when Bishop David A. Smith, First Counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, announced the creation of a filmstrip that showed external evidences to prove the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. In March of the next year, the Church Department of Education released a ten-reel strip—405 photos—on modern Church history, and thus a movement was launched that would last over fifty years and produce hundreds of titles.²²

In January 1935, missionaries in Wales premiered the lantern-slide lecture Joseph Smith—An American Prophet, which became immensely popular in Britain. European Mission President Joseph F. Merrill quickly ascertained how effective such visual lectures could be and assigned one of his assistants, Gordon B. Hinckley, to return home and persuade the First Presidency to supply more filmstrips and audiovisual materials. Hinckley met with President Grant and his counselors on August 20, 1935, but did not know that his previous mission president and family friend, John A. Widtsoe, had been working with Bishop Smith on a Church publicity committee for over a year. For the previous few months, Widtsoe had been asking for a paid employee, and when Hinckley appeared, he pounced. The Church replaced Widtsoe’s committee with the new Radio, Publicity and Mission

This photograph, which accompanied an article by Gordon B. Hinckley in the May 2, 1936, Church News, amply demonstrates what he termed “the romance of a celluloid strip.” The illustrated lecture, he averred, allowed missionaries to present the gospel in an intriguing and dignified manner. “Without the odium of propaganda, it catches the interest of the listener.” It also, not insignificantly, made the missionaries more mobile and versatile than when they used magic lanterns.
Literature Committee, asking Hinckley to become its executive secretary. Though the group included six Apostles, including Widtsoe, Hinckley did the bulk of the work under the guidance of chair Stephen L Richards. Hinckley went to work writing scripts and overseeing the distribution of filmstrips, radio plays, and other media. Because of these efforts and the microfilming of genealogical records, by 1936 he reported that the Church was the largest user of film stock outside of the federal government.  

Though interested in motion pictures, Hinckley did not have time to learn the craft. This would wait for the arrival of Frank Wise from England. A native of Bournemouth, Wise was working in the British film industry when he met the missionaries in 1937. He moved to Utah in 1939 and, after being influenced by Hinckley and other returned missionaries from England, was baptized that October. He immediately joined forces with Hinckley—they even shared an office—helping primarily with the technical aspects of the filmstrip work, beginning with the creation of a system to mass produce Kodachrome filmstrips, which eliminated the costly process of painting the celluloid by hand. The duo’s filmstrips grew longer and of a higher quality, introducing recorded narration and a variety of topics. They shot some motion picture footage with their personal finances, but soon World War II precluded any further work in that direction. When the war ended, full-fledged institutional film production began again after a seventeen-year hiatus. During that interim, the motives and methods for Church media had realigned to serve the Church’s educational programs and missionary work, effectively creating a demand that would help bring about a renewal and expansion of Church film production.

Home Distribution and Exhibition

While filmstrips evolved from being an experimental medium to becoming a staple of Church instruction and proselytizing, the Church was also evolving its use of motion pictures and the infrastructure that would support them. The exhibition of films in church buildings, as noted earlier, began during the First Wave as an effort to provide suitable recreation alongside other activities sponsored by the Church’s Mutual Improvement Association. Ten years later, in 1929, film exhibition in LDS church buildings had become a prominent characteristic of American Mormon culture, even without the organizing guidance of the Social Advisory Committee.

A few stakes followed the example of those that had earlier built amusement halls by creating and operating working motion picture theaters entirely for Church-sanctioned exhibition. One example is the Fountain Green Theatre, run by the Fountain Green Ward of the Moroni (Utah) Stake
from 1929 to 1935. A better-known example, the Sharon Community Educational and Recreational Association (SCERA) in Orem, Utah, was begun as a sort of amusement committee by the Sharon Stake in 1933 in response to a request by the First Presidency for local leaders to oversee community recreation. The organization almost immediately became a state-registered nonprofit cooperative, and funds for a swimming pool were raised from film screenings; these became so popular a cinema was also built. Though this theater, which still operates today, was not completed under Church auspices, it was built on Church-donated land and still maintains the “family friendly” atmosphere that inspired its initial construction. Since 2005 it has appropriately been the home of the LDS Film Festival.

Despite the prevalence of films being shown in LDS buildings, exhibition was at first unorganized. This changed in the Second Wave as the purpose for exhibiting films shifted from social enrichment toward instruction in the history, doctrines, and programs of the Church—a gradual change that would not culminate until the Church eventually created and supplied its own films. This evolution of purpose was prompted at least in part by the success of filmstrips serving various Church needs, by a growing recognition among Church leadership of the potential of film for
education (not merely recreation), and by a shift in the entities that oversaw the use of film in the Church. The Mutual Improvement Association had provided some direction after the Social Advisory Committee dissolved in 1922, but in the Second Wave, the Sunday School took over and reoriented the use of film, and Deseret Book was organized as a distribution system to bring motion pictures approved for Church programs to LDS congregations. Both organizations profited from the leadership of A. Hamer Reiser, who had been involved with Church films since 1921.

The Sunday School began to improve and standardize Church film exhibition facilities in 1932 under the leadership of Sunday School Superintendent (and future Church President) David O. McKay. He instructed Reiser, then serving as the Sunday School General Secretary, to strike a deal with Electrical Research Products Incorporated to outfit all three hundred wards in the Church with 35mm projectors (McKay had witnessed a demonstration of their projection equipment at a Rotary Club meeting). Reiser began experimenting with showing educational films in meetinghouses, and, like his close mentor McKay, grew passionate about their pedagogical potential. For the time being, attempts to create original motion pictures proved too costly, so Reiser focused on filmstrips while at the same time creating a working library and film projector service throughout the Sunday School.
Reiser continued to perfect the Church exhibition infrastructure when in 1942 he was named general manager of the Deseret Book Company. In this capacity, he struck a deal in 1945 with the Bell and Howell Company for 16mm films and equipment similar to his 1932 agreement with Electrical Research Products Inc. for 35mm projectors. Under Reiser, Deseret Book became a vast film rental house, with hundreds of educational and entertainment titles available—not one of which was produced by the Church. By 1951 the liaison with Bell and Howell had placed projectors with 1,200 wards, stakes, and missions: an efficient—and unprecedented—distribution and exhibition network was firmly in place.76

**Deseret Film Productions**

Such a vast undertaking caused Church leaders to pay closer attention to what was being shown. Hence, on January 3, 1948, Reiser announced that the First Presidency had created an LDS Film Council, with Reiser himself as chairman, to “appraise motion pictures and decide upon their suitability for entertainment and teaching purposes.

A “Mobile Service Laboratory.” Deseret Book employees used this van to visit each unit as often as possible, delivering films and inspecting, cleaning, and repairing projection equipment. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
for the various organizations of the Church.” The Council proved quite generous in their recommendations, recognizing the different maturity levels within the Church. They assumed responsibility over Deseret Book’s rental program and undertook to maintain the film equipment throughout the wards. They even sponsored the production of films. This was done not directly by the LDS Film Council but through Deseret Book. The Church-owned book retailer was already the Church’s distributor of non-Church films; now, through its arm Deseret Film, it would implement the production of institutional films.

By the close of World War II, the need was clear for the Church to at last produce its own films, and Reiser was convinced that Deseret Book was the place to do it. He thus undertook two experimental projects with Frank Wise in 1945: the filming of Heber J. Grant’s funeral service on May 18 and a more structured documentary entitled *Christmas with the General Authorities.* In 1946 Reiser hired Wise full time to become the entirety of Deseret Film Productions, where he began literally from scratch—his first task was building benches to sit on. Probably his most important effort was the filming of Church leaders, first in their offices and then at general conference. Technically adapting the Tabernacle to filming was a difficult and controversial endeavor, with the most notable addition being a foot-square periscope emerging from the floor forty feet in front of the pulpit. This allowed Wise to film from the basement, despite the hazard of incoming orange peels from well-meaning conference attendees. He quickly added a remote control system, a second camera, a shock absorption system, larger magazines, and two light bulbs—on the pulpit and organ pipes—to synchronize both cameras with a buzz on the soundtrack. From 1946 to 1953 he filmed at least seventy-five complete talks, with another forty-five done by 1967, at which point the process had been completely taken over by television.
The Utah Centennial Year was celebrated in 1947 (events were planned under a committee chaired by David McKay), and as the festivities approached, Deseret Film Productions, now firmly established with LaMar Williams assisting Wise, was enlisted to create a film intended to launch the entire year’s celebrations. The seventy-minute *Where the Saints Have Trod* was made entirely by these two men in the summer of 1946. It featured Church President George Albert Smith and thirteen other people on a tour along the Mormon Trail, arriving in Salt Lake City on July 24. The movie premiered in January 1947. Wise and Williams followed this with *Tribute to Faith*, a shorter film about the making and dedication of
the This Is The Place Monument, and a fifteen-minute piece called *Centennial Scout Camp* about a celebration among Utah’s Scouts.

The centennial occasioned other productions as well. LaMar Williams and Gordon Hinckley made a motion picture for the Missionary Committee called *Pioneer Trails*, which followed a similar geographical course through Church history. This probably marks Hinckley’s entrance into full-fledged motion picture production. Mormon filmmaker Sullivan Richardson filmed the Sons of Utah Pioneers’ entire reenactment trek in July 1947 in the twenty-minute film *This Is the Place* and also made the documentary *Valley of Triumph* about Salt Lake City, a condensed version of which was shown at the Bureau of Information at Temple Square, the first of many films shown at LDS visitors’ centers.

The centennial proved a huge success, and by its end Deseret Film Productions was a secure and efficient, if small, enterprise. Money was not forthcoming, however, and Williams had to be transferred to another department to justify payroll. Frank Wise pressed on essentially alone. As mentioned, in 1948 he edited some discovered footage of the Clawsons into *Latter-day Saint Leaders: Past and Present*. This was followed in May 1949 with *Temple Square*, Deseret Film’s first attempt at a fictional film with actors, setting early events in Church history within the framework of a tour of Temple Square. The film also includes footage of the Tabernacle Choir in the Tabernacle, overcoming the nineteen-year-old problem of lighting the immense choir area by using a series of sixty one-foot battens lined with spot bulbs and hung “with some difficulty.” The Choir, appropriately, sang the Hallelujah Chorus.

Institutional Church film production had arrived—not leading the way, but complementing the Church’s homemade and now robust network for distributing and exhibiting media. What remained was the next logical step—the formal creation of full-scale production facilities to supply a steady stream of Church-made films to the faithful.

**Wetzel Whitaker and the Welfare Films**

As filmstrips had proven, Church media was effective not just for the faithful but for those outside the religion who might respond positively to the LDS message through audiovisual media. While Deseret Film Productions was beginning its output of films directed mainly to believing members (*Temple Square* probably being the most notable exception), prominent Church leaders were actively exploring means to expand the audiences and uses for film, and they went to the heart of Hollywood to do it.

Church authorities had been greatly impressed with the government’s use of film during World War II, both for training and for promoting its
view of the conflict. The thought that similar productions could be made to promote the Church’s new welfare program induced Apostles Harold B. Lee, Mark E. Petersen, and Matthew Cowley to tour the Walt Disney Studios, where they were hosted by a young LDS animator named “Judge” Wetzel Whitaker. Born in Heber City, Utah, on September 30, 1908, Whitaker earned his nickname because of his stern appearance as a boy. During the visit he suggested that he and other Latter-day Saints might be able to make a film if the Church paid for materials; he later described this as “kind of a rash offer.” After deliberation in Salt Lake, the General Welfare Committee accepted. Walt Disney approved the project with a promise to help however needed, and as one film turned into two, Whitaker eventually enlisted help from his brother Scott, Eric Larson, and numerous others in the area. Work commenced in October 1946 and continued for two full years.

Halfway through the process, Whitaker, weighed down by the responsibility, felt prompted to seek a special blessing from his stake patriarch. In this blessing he was told that “the time will come when you will be called to an assignment which will literally revolutionize the teaching methods of the Church. Thousands of people throughout the Church will know of the work you will do and will bless you and those associated with you.” The anxiety subsided enough for the work to progress. Eric Larson took charge of the film Church Welfare in Action and Whitaker The Lord’s Way. The former film was completed on October 3, 1948, a thirty-five-minute documentary on what the welfare system was and how it functioned. The Lord’s Way, finished a month later, gives two fictional case studies of Church welfare and includes animated sequences lifted from the earlier The Grasshopper and the Ants (1934), a film (from Disney’s popular Silly Symphony series) that promoted personal industry. Though Whitaker found the premiere for the General Authorities nerve-wracking, both films were well received: David O. McKay went so far as to tell Whitaker these were the best films to ever come out of Hollywood. They

President David O. McKay is about to perform a second take in this segment from The Los Angeles Mormon Temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1957). LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
were put into distribution by the following April and were shown for many years. More importantly, they indicated to several Church leaders, McKay perhaps foremost among them, that there was a need for a greater Church-sponsored filmmaking effort than was available through Deseret Book.

A Sacred LDS Film: The Endowment

Although the creation of a filmed version of the endowment ceremony for use in LDS temples began in 1952, the film was not completed until 1955; it can rightly be seen as the apex of Home Cinema. This film is an integral part of the holiest of LDS rites; it is shown in a Church edifice where not even all Latter-day Saints are allowed (let alone outsiders); the content of its script is believed to have been given through revelation; and the various versions of this film throughout the years constitute what is undeniably the most-screened picture in the history of Mormon cinema. Its production process also pertained to Home Cinema, with a small group of faithful Church members, having no industry assistance at any stage, filming within the walls of the Salt Lake Temple itself. Also, it is obviously the most didactic film the Church has ever produced.

The live endowment ceremony in LDS temples included an important dramatic component requiring scenery and a rather large cast, effectively restricting the construction of temples to areas where there were enough Saints to both attend and conduct services. As the new Church President, David O. McKay felt impressed to build smaller temples in areas where fewer LDS members lived, starting with Bern, Switzerland, but he needed a method to present the endowment in multiple languages with fewer temple workers than traditionally required. A committee was formed, but again the responsibility fell principally upon Gordon Hinckley, who characteristically enlisted Frank Wise. Their solution, predictably enough, was to use motion pictures in various languages with only a few temple workers present. Films visually replaced the painted murals on temple walls that had served as scenery, and single projection rooms replaced a series of themed rooms through which temple patrons normally made procession.

With a dedication date of September 11, 1955, looming for the Swiss Temple, Hinckley set about producing the films, which were actually directed by Harold I. Hansen. The majority of production took place, as mentioned, in the large Salt Lake Temple assembly room. A huge set was built, which involved lifting large pieces through the windows with heavy tackle, and an anonymous crew worked entirely as volunteers. After the English language film was approved, versions were completed in French, German, Dutch, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian, requiring not just new casts but also new translations. Due to the sacred nature of
the film, Hinckley made special arrangements for no non-LDS laboratory personnel to develop the footage, and when he personally took the prints to Switzerland he felt divinely assisted in avoiding having to screen it for customs officials. After a great deal of work installing the equipment in the temple and checking each language version for bugs, the dedication took place and a very ill Hinckley suddenly found himself serving as projectionist—the temple engineer had not yet been endowed. President McKay praised Hinckley’s indefatigable efforts at the following October conference, and two and a half years later, in April 1958, he called him to be an Assistant to the Twelve.83

Most Church members believe Hinckley’s role was not coincidental. Soon after he became Church President in 1995, he too felt impressed to cut temple sizes once again and reduce staff. The endowment film has been remade at least four times, always under Hinckley’s supervision. Later versions have included minor changes in content but also reflect the addition of music and increases in technical proficiency, budget, and production design.84

Film could not have made itself more intimately at home with Latter-day Saints than within the most sacred rites of an edifice they call the House of the Lord. The cultural and religious consequences have been far-reaching. Adapting the endowment ceremony to film actually made possible a global transformation of LDS temple worship. Like Muslims seeking Mecca, far-flung Mormons previously aspired to a once-in-a-lifetime journey to Salt Lake City (or to one of only a half-dozen temples located in the Western U.S. and Canada) in order to complete the final ordinances Latter-day Saints believe necessary for their salvation and exaltation. The filmed ceremony changed that, making possible not just the spread of smaller temples to remote areas, but more frequent temple worship by more Latter-day Saints. Given the centrality of the temple to the LDS faith, there is a direct connection between this use of film and the vitality of worldwide Mormonism. Moreover, efforts by Church Presidents McKay and Hinckley to promote film—which go back to the 1930s when McKay was Sunday School Superintendent and Hinckley was the newly returned missionary who became the driving force in the new Radio, Publicity and Mission Literature Committee—were not incidental but central aspects of their Church service.

The BYU Motion Picture Department

The creation of a movie studio of their own was inevitable for Latter-day Saints, given Second Wave developments. By the early 1950s, multiple factors had come together to allow for the creation of a large-scale institutional filmmaking entity, eventually to be placed at Brigham Young University.
These factors included the widespread use of 16mm film stock; the Church’s domestic film distribution network and the subsequent need for product; the success of filmstrips, Deseret Film Productions, and the welfare films initiated at Disney; developments at BYU in their audiovisual instruction and library holdings; and, crucially, the ordination of David O. McKay as President of the Church. The diverse ways the Church had already used film suggested only a greater need for home productions in the future.

Locating production facilities at Church-sponsored Brigham Young University made sense for many reasons—the instructional nature of Church films, the prospective use of media in the university, budding efforts at BYU in broadcasting, and, eventually, a pool of talent in the university community from which to draw for all aspects of production. Creating a BYU motion picture studio seemed as much part of the destiny of the university as of its hosting institution. Interestingly, this development may have been linked as much to missionary work as to educational purposes.

On May 8, 1952, shortly after BYU President Ernest L. Wilkinson had created the aforementioned Radio and Television Committee, Weston N. Nordgren, Provo bureau chief for the Salt Lake Tribune, sent Wilkinson a highly researched, twelve-page, single-spaced memo that seems prophetic today. Nordgren, whose wife was one of Wilkinson’s secretaries, had lived in Southern California and had nurtured an avid interest in the movie industry; he had also written articles for the Improvement Era promoting missionary work. His vision was to use movies to spread the gospel. How his proposal influenced Wilkinson is not clear, as the university was already developing plans to become more involved in filmmaking, but in sending his recommendations to Wilkinson, Nordgren did have the encouragement of Elder John A. Widtsoe, his former mission president in the British Isles. Nordgren proposed three projects that would better equip BYU to carry out the work of the Church. In order of importance, they were: (1) to transfer all film, radio, and television work of the Church from Salt Lake to Provo, establishing a motion picture studio on BYU campus; (2) to establish a three-month missionary training course along with a mission home or dormitory for newly called missionaries; and (3) to construct a temple on what had always been called Temple Hill, where the current campus was then taking shape. In his memo he also recommended a television station and included specific information about creating a Department of Motion Picture, Radio, and Television Arts.

About this same time another BYU committee headed by W. Cleon Skousen, who had worked on the welfare films, was organized to investigate the possibility of creating a studio on campus. While planning continued at BYU, Judge Whitaker, on leave from Disney, entered separate
discussions with Church leaders in Salt Lake City. In October 1952 a meeting was held with Presiding Bishop Joseph L. Wirthlin, Whitaker, Wilkinson, and the BYU finance committee, at which the decision was made to establish the Department of Motion Picture Production the following January. Whitaker was asked to head the project and create the studio. After some deliberation he recalled the blessing he had received four years earlier and everything came into focus. He resigned from Disney and began work at BYU on January 3, 1953.85

Second Wave Reprise

In the Second Wave, movies made a permanent home among the Latter-day Saints. Outsiders portrayed Mormons more sympathetically, and in turn Latter-day Saints warmed to film—working in the film and television industry, experimenting with the medium, innovating film subjects and technologies, and generally domesticating the medium for themselves and their faith. Independent features, such as Corianton, failed at the box office. The Church withdrew from feature film production during this period almost entirely and instead developed an effective alternative medium, filmstrips, whose success conditioned Latter-day Saints and their leaders to using audiovisual media. In a similar way, the Church’s expanding distribution network and exhibition facilities conditioned its members to enjoy and expect motion pictures to come from the Church for various purposes in a variety of settings (even before institutional films were supplied to wards). This infrastructure—a construction of social patterns as much as any logistics for delivering or projecting films—was a more significant creation in this era than the films made, as were the evolving purposes for visual media and broadcasting identified by Church auxiliaries and leaders. Current and future Church Presidents (Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, Harold B. Lee, and Gordon B. Hinckley) played primary roles in the promotion and development of Church filmmaking for use across Church programs, in proselytizing, and even in LDS temple worship. All of this culminated quite naturally in the creation of a full-scale motion picture studio at Brigham Young University to supply the quickly expanding demand for film within a church completely committed to its numerous applications.
During his tenure as head of the BYU Motion Picture Studio, Wetzel O. "Judge" Whitaker directed and produced scores of institutional films, including Church classics such as *Windows of Heaven* (1963), *Man's Search for Happiness* (1964), and *Johnny Lingo* (1969). He is arguably the most important figure in the history of Mormon film. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
The Third Wave:  
Judge Whitaker and the Classical Era (1953–1974)

The Third Wave of Mormon cinema is unquestionably the age of Judge Whitaker. He represents the development of Mormon film from its pioneer infancy into classical maturity. The similarities to Hollywood’s classical era are numerous (with important exceptions). Most obviously, Mormon film finally left behind the multitasking artisanal mode of prior decades in favor of a studio-based industrial infrastructure featuring specialized workers. Equally important, the BYU studio produced films of an identifiable, consistent, and aesthetically and culturally conservative style deeply rooted in Hollywood norms. It supplied a steady stream of products to a vertically integrated distribution and exhibition network. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Church films compare to Hollywood films—and other classical artworks—in their permeating influence upon their host culture. During Whitaker’s tenure, Church films became central to Mormon culture and created a universal doctrinal, cultural, and aesthetic touchstone for Latter-day Saints, to the point that today it is difficult to conceive of the Church without its films and videos. And Judge Whitaker, for his part, has had more influence on Mormon filmmaking than any other person.

It is important to note that institutional LDS film was once again behind the times. Just as the Clawsons had maintained an 1890s style into the 1920s, and the Second Wave practitioners used antiquated forms like slideshows, silent movies, and one- to two-person crews into the 1940s, so too were Church films just launching into their classical period as American filmmakers moved into a postclassical period of sex, violence, and narrative and stylistic disjunction. As a consequence, mainstream films depicting Latter-day Saints (with the general exception of television) returned to postclassical depictions of Mormonism slightly akin to the sensationalist representations of the First Wave. Topics such as polygamy returned and were treated in comical, satirical, or even tragic takes on Mormonism that would pave the way for the “new anti-Mormon film era” of the Fourth and Fifth Waves.
Key Films of the Third Wave

- *Come Back, My Son* (1954, USA, director Judge Whitaker, 25 minutes). This early BYU film was shown in general conference and sealed official Church support for the fledgling studio.
- *How Near to the Angels* (1956, USA, director Judge Whitaker, 42 minutes). The longest BYU film to that date; considered a turning point for the studio.
- *Windows of Heaven* (1963, USA, director Judge Whitaker, 50 minutes). Landmark BYU production on the payment of tithing; one of the studio’s most popular films.
- *Man’s Search for Happiness* (1964, USA, director Judge Whitaker, 13 minutes). This was the defining film for the Church’s institutional use of film for propagandizing purposes.
- *Mahlzeiten* (1967, West Germany, director Edgar Reitz, 90 minutes). This Mormon-themed existential drama was on the cusp of the German New Cinema and reflected the changing cinematic view of Mormonism.
- *Johnny Lingo* (1969, USA, director Judge Whitaker, 26 minutes). A routine film for the Sunday School that arguably has become the most popular institutional film in the history of the Church.
- *Pioneers in Petticoats* (1969, USA, director Judge Whitaker, over 44 minutes). This prestige production for 1969 was a milestone and the closest BYU had yet come to a feature film.
- *Ice Cream and Elevators* (1971, USA, directors Robert Starling and Dean Stubbs, 30 minutes). This romantic comedy inaugurated student filmmaking at BYU.
- *The Church in Action* (1970–1982, USA, directors Judge Whitaker, David Jacobs, various lengths). Judge Whitaker saw these annual documentary records of Church activity as his magnum opus and greatest legacy.
Institutional Films

Finding a Foothold at BYU

Although Judge Whitaker would eventually make BYU the heart of classical Mormon cinema, when he first arrived on campus Mormon filmmaking was once again starting from scratch. An inventory of all filmmaking equipment on campus found just three old 16mm cameras, so the first task was to return to Hollywood, this time for equipment. After this, Whitaker also needed personnel. Whitaker’s first employee was a student named John Green, but for expert help he contacted Frank Wise. Wise, though shocked that a new Church film unit had been formed more or less behind his back, joined the department on a part-time basis until his time-consuming work on the temple endowment film was completed, at which point he came on full time.

That February Bishop Wirthlin requested a number of films, but Judge Whitaker deemed it prudent to start with smaller projects like recordings of university functions, the laying of the Los Angeles Temple cornerstone, and a short promotional film for the university called *B. Y. and You*. The results were encouraging, and soon the department’s budget and personnel were increased, bringing to campus Judge’s brother, writer and animator Scott Whitaker, and cinematographer Robert Stum, whose arrival caused Wise to switch permanently to editing. Soon the group could undertake major projects for the Presiding Bishop’s office, beginning with *Come Back, My Son*, in which Scott Whitaker played “a smoking and card-playing deacon” brought back to full Church activity. This film began a long series of narrative films intended to train and inspire Church members in their duties. A similar film followed, *The Bishop, President of the Aaronic Priesthood Quorum*, dramatizing a bishop’s relationship with the young men of his ward. President McKay was so pleased that he determined *Come Back, My Son* would be shown at the April 1954 general conference. Its impact finally secured full support for the department, and film requests began streaming in. Many Church organizations now joined the Presiding Bishopric in requesting and funding films. Foremost among these was the Sunday School, which desired pictures for its yearly conventions. The first film for that Church auxiliary, begun by Wise at Deseret Film, was *What Is a Sunday School Class Worth?*—a documentary on the methods of Sunday School teacher Ella Stratford, which showed at the Sunday School convention in October 1954.

Subsequent major productions included *The Happy City* about a boy in the Primary Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake, *Pupil Centered Teaching* about a Sunday School teacher who develops a true interest in her
students, *A Teacher Is Born* about the training of a Sunday School teacher, and *It's the Ward Teachers* about the effects of the ward teaching program. The department also began creating secular educational and training films with no doctrinal or Mormon content, beginning in 1955 with *The Story of Chamber Music*, which was followed by titles ranging from *Dance with Us*, about the Virginia Tanner dance group in Salt Lake City, to the rather self-explanatory *Teaching with Chalk*. By late 1955, Whitaker and his team had hit their stride, with one film completed roughly every two to three months; their dramatic productions generally ranged from twenty to thirty minutes. In September 1956 they completed *How Near to the Angels*, a fifty-minute film on the importance of temple marriage that proved a major milestone in the department’s development over just three and a half years. It also showed the inadequacy of their working conditions, and in December 1958 the crew moved into a new facility built in the Carterville river bottoms area of Provo, thus allowing the BYU Motion Picture Department to finally claim the status of a Motion Picture Studio (MPS). At the end of the 1962 fiscal year, the studio showed a profit for the

The exterior of the BYU Motion Picture Studio soon after its 1958 construction. Though the studio has been enlarged and remodeled, the façade remains recognizably similar today. Courtesy Brigham Young University.
first time, and in 1963 Ernest Wilkinson boasted that not only were BYU and USC the only American universities with motion picture production studios, but BYU’s was “much the larger of the two programs.”87

High Tide in the 1960s

Given this momentum, the 1960s provided many opportunities for bigger and higher-quality productions. The first of these came in late 1961 when the Presiding Bishopric requested a film on tithing in response to a crisis in the Church’s finances. Scott Whitaker’s script for Windows of Heaven was appropriately based on a similar situation from the past: Lorenzo Snow’s 1899 tithing reformation, with the bulk of the dramatic emphasis placed on the promise of rain in the parched city of St. George. Though budgeted for a thirty-minute piece, it grew to fifty, and Judge Whitaker was determined to make it their finest production yet. The effort paid off. Not only did the film, which premiered in March 1963, deeply impress President McKay, who had known President Snow personally, but it became one of BYU’s most popular pictures for years to come and, perhaps more
importantly, it appears to have been crucial in raising tithing revenue and relieving the crisis that gave it birth.88

Other crew members besides Judge Whitaker began directing starting in 1963, an important step in the establishment of a film studio. As soon as Windows of Heaven was complete they undertook an equally ambitious project, Man’s Search for Happiness, for the Church’s exhibit at the 1964 New York World’s Fair in Queens. Though only thirteen minutes long, it became their most expensive and difficult project yet, and the crew firmly believed their multiple setbacks were Satan’s attempts to thwart their efforts. The finished film was seen at the fair by an estimated five to six million people, then was shown for years throughout the Church, and was even remade twice. It is very possible that in terms of missionary work, Man’s Search for Happiness is the most important film the studio has made.89

A new soundstage was also completed in 1964. On September 15, however, a fire—caused by a truck’s leaky gasoline tank and a malfunctioning ice cream dispenser—caused extensive damage but miraculously spared all of the film stock and camera equipment. By now Church support of the studio was strong, and the facilities were immediately rebuilt and improved at an estimated cost of $389,000. Despite being homeless, the crew completed twelve films in the 1964–65 fiscal year. In 1969 Pioneers

A domestic scene from Man’s Search for Happiness (1964) in which an Everyman family seeks for the answers to life’s greatest questions. Norma Hall plays the mother, Bryce Chamberlain the father, and Francis Urry the grandfather. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
in Petticoats, created for the centennial of the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association, was the year’s prestige production, but the small Sunday School–sponsored film Johnny Lingo proved a sleeper hit. Set in the Pacific Islands and shot in Hawaii, the filming proceeded through several small miracles, primarily concerning weather, volcanic activity, and cow wrangling. It premiered at a Sunday School conference in February 1969. Though a success at the time, no one could have predicted this film’s almost cult popularity for generations to come.

Into the ’70s: Growth and Diversification

In his final years before retirement, Judge Whitaker continued to direct prolifically but also increasingly moved into a supervisory role while others directed. In December 1970, the Church pursued its first Church-wide
Johnny Lingo star Naomi Kahoilua has her hair adjusted while costar Blaizdell Ma Kee looks on. Kahoilua, a Church College of Hawaii student, was cast locally, while Ma Kee and Francis Urry as Mr. Harris were the only professional actors brought from the continent. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

correlation effort to reduce redundancy in curricula and bring the Church’s rather autonomous auxiliary organizations under tighter priesthood control. This resulted in increased bureaucracy and official oversight of Church films and also eliminated the auxiliary conferences that had long kept the BYU studio in the black.

Frank Wise retired on May 28, 1971, at an honorary end-of-year banquet at which Judge Whitaker himself received a surprise honorary doctorate. With momentum generated from this recognition, Whitaker was able to make his last years at the studio productive ones, producing all of its films and directing several more himself, including the forty-five-minute *The Lost Manuscript*, which was released November 1974, two months after his retirement. What he saw as his most important work and potential legacy, however, bore mixed fruit. This was the longitudinal series *The Church in Action*, begun in 1970. Based on David Jacobs’s research on the Clawson brothers and his own personal vision for the unifying and motivational power of film, Whitaker conceived of a series of annual films that would chronicle the growth and activities of the Church throughout the world, thus encouraging and catalyzing otherwise isolated Latter-day Saints to greater communal effort. The films from the 1970s arguably represent some of the finest work done at BYU, but costs were high, distribution was disappointing, and soon installments were being completed only every few years before the program was disbanded completely in the 1980s. The modern equivalent, Bonneville Communication’s *The World Report*, though useful, lacks the original’s vitality, and attempts by Jacobs to revive the series have proven fruitless.

Judge Whitaker retired on September 4, 1974, after which he continued his interest in Church films and wrote his memoirs *Pioneering with Film*. He passed away on November 1, 1985.

**Expanding Exhibition Venues and Production Entities**

Distribution of films to LDS meetinghouses kept pace with the BYU studio’s production output, and more than ever before film exhibition became an organized and standard part of Church life. In November 1962, Frank Wise wrote of all Church buildings that “facilities for the use of motion picture films are now a regular requirement by the General Authorities.” Non-English-speaking audiences began to be accommodated as the Church started translating films as a major activity, particularly after *Man’s Search for Happiness*. At the local level, film screenings were arguably the Church’s most common fundraiser at this time, hitting an all-time high in January 1970 when the Hayward Stake in southern California raised $70,000 by hosting the world premiere of *Hello, Dolly!*
Obviously, the many official productions coming through Church distribution did not preclude ongoing screenings of Hollywood fare. A renamed Film Screening Committee continued to post movie reviews, encouraging an active and informed engagement with the medium generally.

An additional venue for Church film emerged in this period within the Church Educational System through its efforts to introduce audiovisual material into its curriculum (just as the Sunday School had done years before). In the 1960s, CES personnel began experimenting with still filmstrips for use in seminary and institute classes, hitting their stride by the time the popular *Tom Trails* series was released Church-wide in 1968. Later, CES would collaborate with the BYU studio to make its own films, and Church seminaries would eventually become one of the largest venues for Mormon films and videos.91

The Church’s developing interests in broadcasting (primarily through KSL-TV) broadened the reach of institutional films and led to production of film outside of the BYU studio. KSL was suffering in the early 1950s and received a major overhaul under President McKay, beginning with the installation of Arch Madsen as president. KSL’s productions were primarily event-related, such as general conference and concert films made of the Tabernacle Choir, but as it grew the station delved into documentary and fiction programming. It even released material on film, such as a
documentary on the Los Angeles Temple and another film for the Nauvoo visitors’ center. Other Church departments, like the Genealogical Society of Utah and the Church Building Department, occasionally made films without BYU’s aid, and other entities, principally BYU’s student television department, forayed into televised broadcasting, leading to the creation of a KBYU television station, a PBS affiliate, in November 1965. In 1964 the Church created the Bonneville International Corporation as a holding company for all the Church’s broadcasting interests, including KSL, again with Madsen at its head. By the Fourth Wave, Bonneville would become another distinct production entity within the Church, working parallel to the Motion Picture Studio.

If Church-affiliated broadcasting in Salt Lake City and Provo pushed forward additional filmmaking outside of the BYU Motion Picture Studio, so did students on the BYU campus itself. Extracurricular student films began to appear in 1962 with The Great Grass Cutter, and by 1971 student film became part of the curriculum with the romantic comedy Ice Cream and Elevators. That film, produced by Robert Starling, received administrative sanction through a cameo from university president Ernest Wilkinson, who played a janitor witnessing a romantic elevator scene. This first official student film screened to an enthusiastic crowd of 6,000 in the Smith Fieldhouse. In 1972 a student crew produced a university-sponsored 16mm documentary film on the Mormon Festival of the Arts entitled
Shades of Difference. Today BYU film graduates constitute a disproportionately large number of those working on Mormon films, including the directors of nearly every theatrically released Fifth Wave film thus far. The Church-sponsored university has thus generated institutional films at its Motion Picture Studio and independent films from its students.

**Independent Mormon Films**

Students were not the only Mormons of the Third Wave to make movies independent of the Church, particularly after the BYU studio’s success seemed to open the door for such productions. Perhaps the most serious effort came from the indefatigable Nathan and Ruth Hale in Glendale, California. This couple began a dynasty of community theaters and dramatic productions, usually Mormon-based, and had also been involved in filmmaking since the welfare films of the 1940s. After this initial exposure, they created Seagull Productions and completed at least three 16mm projects, the largest of which was a forty-five-minute color biopic called *Oliver Cowdery, Witness to the Book of Mormon* (1954). Films on the two other witnesses of the gold plates were planned but never materialized.

This, indeed, was the fate of virtually every other attempt at independent Mormon filmmaking throughout the Third Wave—a trend unbroken from the Second Wave. Among the most prominent failures were DeVon Stanfield’s attempt to adapt John D. Fitzgerald’s book *Papa Married a Mormon*, Verland Whipple’s $3 million pioneer epic *Hole-in-the-Rock*, Fred Gebhart’s *Echo Canyon* about the 1857 Utah War, Bill Greenburg’s untitled feature on the pioneer vessel *Brooklyn*, Raymond Goldrup’s television film *Winters of Glory* about pioneers, and even an unspecified project by Scott Whitaker and newcomer Kieth Merrill. Various other efforts were envisioned but never even reached the preproduction stage.

Despite these setbacks, the tenacity of one individual, DeVere Baker, resulted in his producing not just one but several films. Baker decided that he could prove the Book of Mormon true and stop the growth of global communism by sailing a raft west across the Pacific. His multiple failures throughout the 1960s and 1970s eventually moved him out of favor with the general Church populace, but he did succeed in creating and personally exhibiting several films of his voyages, all for fundraising purposes. Though his supporters loved the pictures, his films were generally disregarded by more objective film critics.92
Mormons involved in the film industry gained acclaim internationally and domestically during the Third Wave and contributed importantly to film and television. By 1970 several converts to the Church were gaining significance across the globe, a sign of the international growth of the Church itself. Geza de Rosner from Hungary; Ragnar Lasse Henriksen from Norway; and José María Oliveira Aldamiz, Spain’s first stake president, were examples of this growth; Aldamiz even made a horror film that included Mormon missionaries. A convert with a longer and more prominent career was Lino Brocka of the Philippines, who in 1961 was reportedly the second convert baptized in that country but whose Church affiliation ended before his career took off. Directing forty-seven features, he became internationally recognized as one of the Philippines’ greatest talents and received Golden Palm nominations at Cannes for *Jaguar* in 1979 and *Bayan Ko: My Own Country* in 1984. He died tragically in a car crash in 1991.

In America, Hal Ashby began directing in 1970, launching a prolific and acclaimed career that included titles like *Shampoo* (1975) and *Being There* (1979). In television, Glen Larson became a prominent producer, virtually inventing the hour-long action-drama in the 1980s by creating the shows *The Hardy Boys Mysteries, Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, Magnum P.I., The Fall Guy, Knight Rider,* and *Battlestar Galactica.* The last of these is of particular interest to LDS sci-fi buffs for its reworking of distinctly Mormon elements, such as a twelve-person Council of Elders or the planet Kobol, a metaplasm of the planet Kolob from the Book of Abraham in the *Pearl of Great Price.*

In Utah two smaller-scale filmmakers, Kieth Merrill and Lyman Dayton, caught the most attention. Fresh from BYU, Merrill won the 1973 Oscar for best feature-length documentary with *The Great American Cowboy.* Though to Church members today Merrill is best known for his institutional films, his career has always included other work, primarily regional documentaries for destination IMAX theaters. Dayton began as a producer, finding success with the mainstream features *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1974), *Seven Alone* (1974), and other titles. As a producer and director he attempted to infuse his secular films with Mormon beliefs and philosophies, evidently looking forward to an opportunity to insert overtly LDS characters into his work. He apparently came close to this only once, with the 1984 *Solo,* a survival melodrama based on a real
Latter-day Saint and including an unidentified LDS church service and the LDS hymn “I Am a Child of God.”

The World Comes Calling: The Sundance Film Festival

While Latter-day Saints like Aldamiz and Dayton were injecting Mormonism into their mainstream films, others were about to cause the mainstream to focus on Utah en masse. In October 1970 the Utah Travel Council began officially working with film productions, eventually leading to the creation of the Utah Film Commission under John Earle. In 1978 the commission established the Utah/United States Film Festival in Salt Lake City. In 1981 the festival moved east to Park City and, coincidentally, LDS filmmaker Sterling Van Wagenen cofounded the Sundance Institute with actor Robert Redford. The festival came under the Sundance umbrella in 1985, but its roots were deep in the local community; for the first few years, for example, all submissions were screened at the BYU Motion Picture Studio.
The Sundance Film Festival today is known for premiering quirky and original independent films, and many projects the Institute has helped develop, such as Quentin Tarantino's hard-edged *Reservoir Dogs*, are not typical Mormon fare. Nevertheless, as one of the premiere film festivals in the world, Sundance has permanently made Park City—and northern Utah—a global presence in independent film, just as attractive locations made southern Utah a popular filming location in the First Wave.

**Mainstream Depictions of Mormons**

**The New Mormons: Television**

The rising ubiquity of television in this period offered opportunities for new representations of Mormons. Newsreels were gradually replaced by news and informational programming, and Latter-day Saints began to appear on these and within television documentaries. For instance, Ed Murrow's popular *Person to Person* show once featured a family home evening in the home of Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson.96 In early 1972, Comco Productions included Brigham Young's Lion House in *American Lifestyles*, a documentary series on famous houses and their occupants; a year later ABC aired a documentary that featured the Ray Lindquist family of Salt Lake City; and so on. Entertainment programs such as *Your All American College Show* also proved a welcome venue for Church and BYU performing groups.

Depictions of Mormons were also relatively prominent in fictional programming, including serialized material. After films like *Brigham Young* and *Wagon Master*—and its unauthorized television spin-off *Wagon Train*—Mormon characters could expect to generally be treated well on television where censorship still held a heavier hand than in the theaters. Mormons accordingly popped up in sympathetic roles in western shows such as *Bonanza* and *Here Come the Brides*. *Death Valley Days* proved particularly fruitful, providing a continuing source of interesting, historically-based stories about Mormons, such as hauling the Tabernacle organ pipes across Death Valley. Several episodes were written by Latter-day Saints like Scott Whitaker. One remarkable production was the January 17, 1965, episode of NBC's *Profiles in Courage* in which Peter Lawford portrayed General Alexander Doniphan and his wrenching 1838 decision to disobey an order and not execute Joseph Smith and his associates.

But the most interesting and ambitious effort to put the Church on television was sadly a failed one. In 1971 Screen Gems attempted to create
an hour-long dramatic series entitled *Movin’ On* for NBC. Pat Wayne (John’s son) and Geoffrey Deuel played two itinerant stock racers who set off in search of America. The pilot episode starts them in Salt Lake City—thanks largely to the efforts of Governor Calvin Rampton—where Wayne’s character becomes involved with a Mormon travel agent played by Kate Jackson; the climax is a race between him and her rich Mormon boyfriend. Though other episodes were to take the characters to different locales, Jackson’s character, an atypically modern and feminist depiction of Mormonism, was to be permanent. The premiere aired in February 1972 but was not picked up for fall distribution, meaning that no subsequent episodes were likely to have been shot. There would be no similar attempt to portray modern Utah or Mormonism until HBO’s *Big Love* in 2006.

**The Production Code Ends: A Return to the Theaters**

After *Wagon Master*, Mormon characters made occasional appearances in Hollywood films, usually in minor roles or minor productions, such as Twentieth Century Fox’s 1958 B-western *Blood Arrow*. A Mormon girl played by Phyllis Coates enlists three men to help her cross hostile Blackfoot Indian territory to get a smallpox serum to her town. By the end, not only has she saved her community and won her man, but her upright charms have even converted him to the faith. Mormonism was often most interesting for when it was omitted, such as in *Utah Blaine* (1957) or the cult horror classic *Carnival of Souls* (1962), which is very explicit in placing the story in modern Utah then equally deliberate in emphasizing that none of the characters, except perhaps the zombies at the Salt Air Pavilion, are LDS. A similar decision was made with Otto Preminger’s *Advise and Consent* (1962), in which a character identified in Allen Drury’s novel as the son of an Apostle became a Latter-day Saint only by inference. Despite this and its apparent lack of concern for the matter, this film remains arguably the best of films critical of Mormonism; where previous films had invented ludicrous accusations, here the homophobia of the implied Mormon community is sobering in its accuracy.

The most important film after *Advise and Consent* was Joshua Logan’s 1969 adaptation of the stage musical *Paint Your Wagon*, starring Lee Marvin, Clint Eastwood, and Jean Seburg (as the Mormon Elizabeth Woodling). In an amazing acrobatics of polygamy and polyandry that one reviewer called “a Mormon ménage,”97 Elizabeth arrives in the all-male No Name City as a second wife of a Mormon, is auctioned off to Ben Rumson (Marvin) but also falls in love with Pardner (Eastwood), and thus settles down with both, resulting in a threesome for most of the film. After
respectable Protestants arrive, Elizabeth and Pardner choose monogamy as Ben opts for the open road.

The International Perspective

The weakening Production Code was replaced by today’s rating system on November 1, 1968, allowing for full-blown sexual explorations of Mormonism that Advise and Consent could only imply. The two films that most openly signify this shift both had European ties. In late 1969 two American film producers announced from Rome the release of their film The Polygamist, an apparently adult film about a man with two wives in the midst of the 1857 Utah War. Previously unable to get approval under the Code, the duo now hoped to secure distribution under the new rating system; no evidence, however, indicates they were successful. The second film was not only financially successful but openly pornographic; this was the Danish skin flick The Bordello (Bordellet), which premiered outside competition at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival and went on to lengthy European and North American runs. Though Mormon characters featured in the film only briefly, the LDS Danish Mission public relations director fruitlessly protested the film; no larger Church action was taken. Though extreme, The Bordello was representative of a rising trend in European productions. Never limited by censorship like their American counterparts, European film producers had simply avoided Mormonism because it was not commercial. In the wake of the sexual revolution, however, and with their new conservative image as an attractive foil to changing mores, Mormons again found their way into European films.

But depictions of Mormons in European films of this period were not uniformly negative or prejudicial. A great many informative and complimentary television documentaries appeared, particularly in West Germany, but the most prolific and even-handed producer of such films was and continues to be the BBC. Given the ample play of anti-Mormon films in the United Kingdom during the First Wave, this signifies a substantial shift that had occurred in Britons’ perception of Mormonism since the 1920s.

The Italian film industry took a mixed approach to the Church as Mormons appeared occasionally in the new spaghetti westerns. The first examples are The Big Gundown (1966) and Trippa Joe (1968), but the concept reached its peak in the 1971 They Call Me Trinity. In this film, a land-hungry gangster and some Mexican thugs threaten a group of pacifist Mormons. The lazy but quick-draw Trinity agrees to defend them after bathing (clothed) with two buxom Mormon blondes who offer to marry him. Though victorious, Trinity slinks off during a prayer when he realizes
how much work the Mormons intend for him to undertake. The film was unarguably one of the most influential spaghetti westerns ever made (and even played at BYU's Varsity Theater), but none of the sequels or spin-offs included Mormon elements.

Far more troubling was the West German feature *Mahlzeiten* (*Mealtimes*, 1967). Directed by Edgar Reitz on the cusp of the New German Cinema movement, the film garnered international praise, including a best new director award at the Venice Film Festival. In it, young lovers Rolf and Elisabeth marry and start a family but are troubled by marital difficulties and his failed career. LDS missionaries enter and present a hopeful solution. The couple is baptized, but things continue to slide downhill until Rolf commits suicide and Elisabeth marries another Latter-day Saint to move to America, a bleak and open ending. Starkly realistic, it enjoyed full cooperation from local Church leaders who allowed the use of an LDS stake center and real American missionaries. They quickly reversed their position when they learned that the film included sexual content and the Church was not depicted in a favorable light; the “mock baptism” the filmmakers allegedly promised not to include was reportedly the most embarrassing component, and a local campaign to have the LDS content excised failed. Many Church members in Germany and America did not find it so entirely distasteful, however, and, as with *Advise and Consent*, most non-Mormons did not even think that the Church was at issue.

Negative depictions of Mormons in Europe were opposed by the Church or members only on the local level. The fact that central Church leadership ignored such films measures the great distance the movie industry and the Church had come since *A Victim of the Mormons* had captured international attention and galvanized the Church to respond and enter
filmmaking itself. By 1972 films like *The Bordello* could only hope for fringe status within a vastly expanded film culture. Besides, by this time Mormons had achieved the ability to represent themselves successfully in America and beyond through their own filmmaking, as the proselytizing and public relations success of *Man’s Search for Happiness* amply demonstrated.

If after 1968 mainstream depictions of Mormons in America and Europe devolved to the same mode of exploitation and sensationalism characteristic of the First Wave, this time around such depictions came more as an annoyance than as a threat. These films, however, were indicative of the mentality that would give rise to another era of anti-Mormon films in the Fourth Wave that would prove more troublesome.

**Third Wave Reprise**

The Third Wave of Mormon cinema can be seen as the era in which LDS filmmaking truly came of age. Under the guidance of Judge Whitaker, David O. McKay, and others, institutional Church films transformed from an ad hoc individualized endeavor into an organized and industrialized process. Though mainstream productions were increasingly ambivalent and independent Mormon filmmakers largely failed in their efforts at creating religious feature films, by 1974 the classical corps of institutional LDS pictures had prepared Mormons for the increased growth, changes, and reinterpretations—institutionally and independently—that would occur in the upheavals of the Fourth Wave.

Judge Whitaker and his crew traveled the world during his tenure—shooting across the United States and in Japan, Latin America, and a host of European countries—yet they are seen here, appropriately enough, hard at work in their native Utah Valley. Whitaker’s last great effort, the *Church in Action* films, sought to connect Church members across the globe through film. Still, the majority of BYU’s productions were shot at their own studio, and Whitaker’s work galvanized independent Mormon film productions throughout the state. Filming atop a studio vehicle has long been a common practice to get just the right shot. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
An iconic still from the Church’s 1993 epic *Legacy*, arguably the most prestigious Mormon film of the 1990s. *Legacy* is also emblematic of the Fourth Wave, as films, particularly within the Church, became larger in terms of production scale and narrative scope. The film’s star, Kathleen Beller, is seen carrying a child at the front of the procession. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

The Fourth Wave deserves to be known as the Mass Media Era for at least three reasons. First, it was the first period dominated by video technology and various media besides traditional film; though I shall continue to use the term filmmaking, the majority of productions were now distributed electronically, even if they did not originate that way. Second, because of electronic distribution and the inexpensiveness and ubiquity of video, this era was marked by an incredibly wide dissemination of film compared with previous eras. Television, VHS, and satellite broadcasts revolutionized distribution by making obsolete the exhibition of an individual reel of film to a physically unified audience; now media was disseminated en masse to geographically isolated individuals. Third, not only did the amount of production mushroom, but often individual films were massive, particularly within the Church, making the Fourth Wave also the age of the LDS epic.

Institutional Church Productions

Spencer W. Kimball: Lengthening the Church’s Audiovisual Stride

It is instructive to note that this period began simultaneously with the presidency of Spencer W. Kimball. Though less involved in filmmaking than Presidents Grant, McKay, or, later, Hinckley, President Kimball created an atmosphere that profoundly reshaped the course of Church audiovisual productions. Virtually the first major discourse Kimball delivered as president was “When the World Will Be Converted,” given to the Church’s regional representatives at the April 1974 general conference. He spoke at length about the potential of electronic broadcasting as a proselytizing medium capable of reaching “the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8), emphasizing technologies like radio transistors and satellites. This discourse not only established a missionary zeal for his entire administration, but also embodied—and galvanized—the mass-media nature of the Fourth Wave. From this point on, Church media was expected to span the globe in proclaiming the gospel in every language.

The Church implemented President Kimball’s vision through a variety of means. One that has not often been associated with cinema is the
Key Films of the Fourth Wave

• *Cipher in the Snow* (1974, USA, director Keith Atkinson, 23 minutes). One of BYU’s best-known educational films, this helped mark the transition from the Third to the Fourth Wave.

• *Homefront* spots (begun in 1972, USA, many directors, beginning with Stan Ferguson, about 30 seconds each). This long-running public service announcement series by Bonneville Communications is among the Church’s best-known and most-awarded works.

• *The First Vision* (1976, USA, director David Jacobs, 14 minutes). This classic film on young Joseph Smith was the first Church production not made for a specific organization or auxiliary.

• *Brigham* (1977, USA, director Thomas McGown, 132 minutes). This biopic of Brigham Young marks the return of the theatrically produced feature film by, for, and about Mormons.

• *The Mouths of Babes* (1980, USA, director T. C. Christensen, 15 minutes). This humorous film showing interviews of LDS children is a milestone in Mormon documentary and children’s films.

• *Joseph Smith: The Man* (1980, USA, director T. C. Christensen, 10 minutes). A fiction-documentary hybrid that many consider marks an aesthetic and spiritual milestone in Mormon film.

• *Mr. Krueger’s Christmas* (1980, USA, director Kieth Merrill, 26 minutes). This Christmas film starring James Stewart marks a high point in the Church’s efforts to reach a broad audience.


• *Perilous Journey* (1984, USA, director John Linton, 99 minutes). This independent Mormon-made feature film is an earnest alternative to many more recent offerings.
• *The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley* (1985, USA, director Brian Capener, 60 minutes). This biographical film on LDS scholar Hugh Nibley marks a high point in institutional documentary productions.

• *How Rare a Possession: The Book of Mormon* (1987, USA, director Russell Holt, 64 minutes). This well-produced film with several thematically linked storylines fully inaugurated the age of the institutional epic.

• *Together Forever* (1988, USA, director Michael McLean, 30 minutes). This short pseudodocumentary is arguably the Church’s most important proselytizing film since *Man’s Search for Happiness*.

• *A More Perfect Union: America Becomes a Nation* (1989, USA, director Peter Johnson, 112 minutes). The longest film ever produced by a Church entity, this represents the pinnacle of secular/educational productions at BYU.

• *The Lamb of God* (1993, USA, director Russell Holt, 27 minutes). Arguably the Church’s most lavish biblical production, which has been extensively disseminated and repurposed.


• *Legacy* (1993, USA, director Kieth Merrill, 52 minutes). Perhaps the best-known film of the Fourth Wave, this pioneer epic inaugurated film screenings in the remodeled Joseph Smith Memorial Building. The building’s auditorium—the Legacy Theater—now bears the film’s name.

• *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000, USA, director Kieth Merrill, 67 minutes). This immense Book of Mormon epic followed *Legacy* as the Church’s prestige production for screening at Temple Square.
spread of LDS visitors’ centers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These had long existed, but under Kimball’s administration they became a prime venue for film exhibition, expanding in step with the new temples being constructed across the United States and the world. For instance, those curious enough to stop at the new LDS temples going up along the beltway in Washington, D.C., or in the center of Mexico City were guided through an adjacent visitors’ center featuring one or more film presentations.

In the late 1970s, the Church installed an in-house nonbroadcasting electronic production system in the Church Office Building. This system included nine translation booths and video equipment that could be connected to the auditorium, a conference room, and other areas of the building. The equipment was used for seminars held in the auditorium, including those for mission presidents and regional representatives; other uses included the recording of video materials for the Church’s deaf membership and audio materials for the blind.100

Experiments with other electronic transmissions followed: portions of the October 1979 general conference were sent, delayed, to various receptors in Europe, and in April 1980 the process was reversed as Kimball and Gordon B. Hinckley spoke via satellite from upstate New York to the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. A year and a half later the Church began creating its own satellite system; a fireside on December 5, 1982, inaugurated the completed 500-building system. General conferences, firesides, film premieres, training meetings, and even sporting events have been broadcast in this way, with ever-increasing scope. In the late 1980s and 1990s, for instance, a series of “open house” film premieres were broadcast via the satellite network, each hosted by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—an adaptation of the classic cottage meeting to the mass-media era.

If satellites allowed the Church to send visual material on the largest scale yet, then VHS was its complement. Around 1975 the Church began to gradually replace its ubiquitous 16mm projectors with televisions and VCRs. Any grassroots efforts became official on November 13, 1982, when the First Presidency issued a letter urging local units to convert from 16mm to a video recorder and television set. The Church would cover 50 percent of the cost.101 After this the changeover was quick and complete.

Jesse Stay and the Educational Film

Jesse E. Stay directed the BYU studio from Whitaker’s retirement in 1974 until 1983, a period that in retrospect is perhaps best defined by the dominance of secular educational films. Their increased prominence came
from many factors, perhaps most importantly the rise of bureaucracy within the structure of the Church and the implementation of Correlation to coordinate curriculum across the Church’s many auxiliaries. The increased time required to move a religious project through multiple levels of authorization meant that many films were dated or obsolete by the time they were released. Educational films were not subject to such delays or to the effects of dozens of untrained hands stirring the pot and thus became faster to produce and, often, of higher quality when finished. This trend was already evident with Cipher in the Snow, a cautionary tale completed under Whitaker in the spring of 1974, and a list of the era’s best-known titles illustrates the strength of the educational film’s position: John Baker’s Last Race (1976), about a dying track star’s efforts with a girls’ track team; The Gift (1977), about a boy who does the farm chores as a Christmas present to his father; The Mailbox (1977), in which an elderly widow pines for contact with her distant children; The Phone Call (1978), which comedically contrasts a young man’s shyness with one girl with his easily developing friendship with another; Uncle Ben (1978), about an alcoholic who reforms to care for his sister’s children; and The Emmett Smith Story (1979), about a runner overcoming a physical disability and inspiring a student to do the same. Though Stay described such films as “filler” as compared to more important religious productions, they represent some of the best-known productions in the studio’s history.

Of course, the BYU studio was not without its religious films. Foremost among these was The First Vision, directed by David Jacobs for an August 1976 release. A fifteen-minute account of Joseph Smith’s 1820 vision of the Father and Son, this was the first religious BYU film not commissioned by a single Church department; it also surpassed Man’s Search for Happiness as the studio’s most popular film. In addition to Judge Whitaker’s ongoing The Church in Action series, there were several important films. Of these, Where Jesus Walked, a 1976 documentary contrasting the modern Holy Land with scriptural descriptions of Jesus’ life, deserves particular mention. Scott Whitaker, the director, nurtured the project with a tenacity and vision greater than for any of his previous works, even during the remote production when severe back pains limited his mobility. Before the filming was complete, his health forced him to return home, and Bob Stum directed the remaining footage. Scott Whitaker was diagnosed with bone cancer and passed away a few weeks later, having never retired. The film was dedicated to his memory.
Peter Johnson and the Institutional Feature Film

The BYU Motion Picture Studio films in the late 1970s generally suffered from a lack of distribution as the transition to video was underway. And the studio itself suffered from a lack of growth and professionalism. The reasons were numerous, but one significant factor was the rise of Bonneville and its command of Church productions. This meant fewer projects for the BYU studio, resulting in reduced revenues. The diminished financial resources did not allow for new hires or for upgrading equipment, and thus, at a time when the mainstream industry was undergoing rapid technical and technological change, the BYU studio and its personnel became quickly outdated.

When Stay retired on September 1, 1983, he was replaced by Peter N. Johnson. Johnson had been working in the film industry in Los Angeles when BYU invited him to reorganize and direct its academic film program. He spent the next eighteen months setting up an essentially new program. Soon after the university approved the curriculum he was asked to also take over as head of the studio. Johnson’s commitment to the

For *The First Vision* (1976), a camera dolly was set up to follow young Joseph Smith (Stewart Petersen) into the Sacred Grove. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
academic program helped define a new direction for the studio as well. One of the challenges in creating a strong academic program for the students, Johnson explained, “was the fact that there were not many available LDS instructors with strong industry experience or credentials who were in a career position to move to Provo and teach.” For a school like UCLA, this was not a problem because many of its film instructors were working professionals who were living in the same community. While this wasn’t possible at BYU, Johnson did see, with the studio, an opportunity to create a strong program for the students. The core of that program was to involve them, as much as their schedules would allow, in internship positions working on films the studio produced.

A three-pronged approach resulted: (1) Give the students a great curriculum and excellent instructors to teach the theory and some skill in filmmaking. (2) Give them firsthand experience working in a professionally operated motion picture studio, working side-by-side with the staff. (3) Bring in outside industry professionals, arrange for the studio’s direct involvement in the production of their projects, and have students work on those projects. This approach would allow the students to graduate from the university with an academic degree, a résumé listing legitimate industry experience, and critically important contacts with practicing professionals in the larger industry.

“The philosophy behind the operation of the studio,” Johnson explained, “was that we should strive in every way to achieve excellence in our productions.” He pursued this goal, in part, by bringing in many new creative and technical professionals—some permanent, some frequent free-lancers—to be a part of the crew. This program did double duty—it kept staff up-to-date with the industry and it gave the students the experience and contacts they needed.

During these years the studio took on many small, unassuming projects, including corporate-style training films like The Church Sports Official (1986) or Caring for the Needy (1987), a film to train bishops in the Church’s welfare system. But there were also higher-profile works like the 1987 remake of Man’s Search for Happiness and a documentary made for the Missionary Department, Called to Serve (1991), directed by Blair Treu. While such projects made up the day-to-day operations of the studio, Johnson also ushered in a string of major projects that were each greater—longer, larger, and generally costlier—than the last. The increased scale of these films came to typify not only Johnson’s tenure but the entire Fourth Wave as well.

The first of these, The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley (1985), was also the least likely. Despite being nonfiction, it was
a truly large-scale film, following Nibley’s nimble mind and life across hemispheres and millennia. This film was originally conceived by John W. Welch, Brian Capener, Hugh’s son Alex Nibley, and Sterling Van Wagenen at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). They had begun filming some interviews before the MPS’s involvement. Capener directed the film, and though essentially unknown today it stands out as one of the most genuine, engaging, and spiritually sensitive films in the history of Mormon cinema. While production was underway, MPS personnel began planning a series of biographical films on LDS intellectuals, but the only other film to be completed was *Speak That I May See Thee: Conversations with Arthur Henry King* (1990), directed by Tom Lefler. *Buckaroo Bard* (1988), a documentary on cowboy poetry featuring Waddie Mitchell, a real cowboy who was working a Church ranch in Nevada, also exemplified the studio’s expanding vision in terms of content and style.

But it was in narrative films that the high-production-value feature film and Mormon cinematic epic began to flourish. BYU’s largest film since *The Lost Manuscript* (1974) was *How Rare a Possession: The Book of Mormon* (1987). This film symbolized the evolving relationship between the Provo-based BYU Motion Picture Studio and the Salt Lake City-based Church hierarchy. Russell Holt, a Church employee, had developed the project and had hoped to produce and direct it, not through the studio but through the Audiovisual Division of the Curriculum Department. This fairly new division of the Curriculum Department had aspiring filmmakers who yearned to make their own films and not have to go to Bonneville or the BYU studio. The film, however, was assigned to the BYU studio. There were no strings attached, but because Johnson was striving to develop a positive working relationship with this new AV division, and because Holt was the writer and a good filmmaker, Johnson asked him to direct it. *How Rare a Possession*, which includes three main stories plus vignettes from the Book of Mormon, grandly indicated the direction all future Church films would take, with longer running times, increased budgets, and 35 or 70mm film stock—characteristics of large-scale prestige
productions and a marked contrast to the Third Wave, when Judge Whitaker only occasionally deviated from the use of 16mm film.¹⁰⁶

_A More Perfect Union: America Becomes a Nation_ (1989), which Johnson directed, was a secular production that can be seen as the apex of the educational films begun under Whitaker over thirty years earlier. The film was created as BYU’s contribution to America’s celebration of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. The story of the creation of the Constitution is complex, and the original screenplay by playwright Tim Slover was long enough for a substantial miniseries, but budgetary and other considerations necessitated shortening the film to approximately two hours’ running time. KBYU, the university’s PBS affiliate, was in charge of placing the film within the PBS syndication market, where it received regional distribution. It was awarded a regional Emmy and was nominated for a national Emmy, an indication that the studio was succeeding at achieving excellence in its productions. As intended, _A More Perfect Union_ has had a long life: it is still a regular component in the BYU curriculum, and it is also being marketed to public and private schools around the country.

As opposed to most departments and programs at BYU, the Motion Picture Studio had always been financially self-sustaining. The need to remain in the black had caused Whitaker, Stay, and now Johnson to pursue two paths: excellent religious films in hopes of garnering further commissions from the Church, and educational productions—particularly effective under Stay—to bring in additional revenue. In the 1980s, these strategies generally worked, but with the proliferation of Church work to other entities such as Bonneville, there were still occasional gaps in the production schedule. In order to maintain a superior facility and simply cover overhead, Johnson struck upon

![Blocking a scene, including having the wind turn pages of a mysterious book, for the film _How Rare a Possession_ (1987). BYU student Mark Deakins played Lorenzo Di Francesca in the film. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.](image)
a new concept: he sought and gained university approval to produce feature films for theatrical release.

In doing so he had good precedent. Judge Whitaker had often spoken of moving toward the feature film, and several screenplays were solicited under both Whitaker and Stay. In the 1970s the Church, separate from BYU, sought fervently to commercially produce a theatrical biopic on Joseph Smith in Hollywood. Church agents initially contracted with Robert Bolt, hoping to repeat his success with *A Man for All Seasons*, and after this fell through in 1977, a separate entity within Bonneville International Corporation was established for the sole purpose of soliciting scripts on speculation, generally from non-Mormons. This effort, which irritated some MPS employees for being passed over, extended for several years before being given up, but its shadow has remained with Mormon cinema to this day.

Under Johnson, the MPS looked at a number of potential theatrical projects, the most developed of which was a feature on the British religious reformer John Lathrop that Johnson announced publicly before *A More Perfect Union* was even completed. These were all shelved, however, as the studio devoted the majority of three and a half years to the production of the two new endowment films, and by the time these were complete, Church leaders had arrived at a decision that made the question of commercial features moot.

Over the years, the Church had conducted several studies and evaluations about how to best position its resources for future motion picture production activities. Many ideas were considered. What had evolved over time were competing entities for Church film projects: the BYU studio,
Bonneville, the Audiovisual Division of the Curriculum Department, many smaller audiovisual operations in various Church departments, and outside free-lance producers. Within the Church structure itself were many duplications of personnel and equipment.

At this time, the tax-exempt status of BYU was also a consideration, especially when Rex Lee became university president. Although the primary objectives at the studio were to support university programs and produce Church films, and any film for commercial release was subordinate to and made with the intent to support these primary objectives, legal questions arose. Years before, the university attorney had performed a legal audit for the studio, and although it was functioning within the parameters identified by that audit, a new university administration was concerned about tax-exempt-status issues. These issues, and the fact that they saw the studio primarily doing work for the Church, made them question the studio’s position at BYU.

After long and careful consideration, Church leaders made their decision, and on March 1, 1991, the Audiovisual Department was created from the Curriculum Department’s Audiovisual Division. This new department would oversee all Church media production. The First Presidency wrote: “It is our hope that this action will optimize the use of Church-owned

A scene from *A More Perfect Union* (1989). The cast included some of the best-known faces from Church films of the 1980s and 90s; there was even a small part for a BYU film student named Richard Dutcher. Courtesy Brigham Young University Motion Picture Studio.
audiovisual facilities and personnel and eliminate duplication of services, equipment, manpower and production costs.\textsuperscript{107} Consolidation and efficiency were legitimate aims at a time when Church media-producing entities had multiplied—as had the means and purposes for film production.

The immediate effect was to separate the BYU studio from the university. Renamed the Latter-day Saint Motion Picture Studio, its leaders reported directly to a committee of General Authorities, including the entire First Presidency. Peter Johnson was promoted to executive producer in the new AV Department, and Merrill Dimick took his place at the Motion Picture Studio. Bill Schaefermeyer succeeded Dimick in 2002, at which point all the internal departments were reorganized vertically to completely eliminate the slight autonomy Dimick had carefully guarded. The modern MPS has no studio-wide independence but is completely integrated into the Church Audiovisual Department.

The LDS Motion Picture Studio

Because of the change, educational films ceased and Merrill Dimick’s tenure became best known for a few large-scale coproductions executed by both Salt Lake and Provo interests. For instance, moves were already underway for the Church’s next large project, \textit{Legacy} (1993). This film resulted from physical rejuvenation around Temple Square begun in the late 1980s, part of which included the Church’s purchase and renovation of the adjacent Hotel Utah, a personal project of Gordon B. Hinckley, at the time a member of the First Presidency. He desired to increase the building’s use and struck upon the idea of converting the Grand Ballroom into an IMAX theater; when this proved impossible the design was changed to accommodate 70mm. He contacted Keith Merrill and contracted him to create a film for the venue. Hinckley, no stranger to scripts, gave Merrill the majority of his material and carefully reviewed each draft, which resulted in a film not unlike \textit{One Hundred Years of Mormonism}, both in content—which follows the Church from 1830 to 1847—and scale. The production was typically massive and required extensive cutting to reach a running time of fifty-two minutes, allowing for hourly showings. The renamed Joseph Smith Memorial Building was dedicated on June 27, 1993, and \textit{Legacy} premiered on July 3. Initial patronage was so high that on August 14 officials asked locals to stop coming so that those visiting from long distances could attend. By May 1994 it was estimated that several hundred thousand had seen the film.\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Legacy} not only imitated \textit{One Hundred Years of Mormonism} but also, in its ambitious production values and spectacular exhibition setting, \textit{Man’s Search for Happiness} from the
1964 World’s Fair. Thus, in the Fourth Wave, trends from many different periods were coming together into a single spectacular whole.

Although Legacy remains the Church’s best-known film from 1993, it could be seen as part of a trio of major productions appearing that same year, which also included The Mountain of the Lord and The Lamb of God. The first of these depicts the construction of the Salt Lake Temple and was directed by Peter Johnson. It premiered between sessions of the April conference, three months before Legacy, and at seventy-five minutes is the longer of the two films. The Lamb of God, directed by Russell Holt, matched these films in scope but was otherwise different in length—twenty-seven minutes—and subject matter, as it depicts Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection. The film’s footage has been used in a several other Church productions, most notably in a virtually identical version called To This End Was I Born. In its original form, The Lamb of God is strictly biblical, causing it to be extensively broadcast and distributed as a friend-builder for the Church.

Another film on Christ’s life, grander in scope and length, was the studio’s last major film of the Fourth Wave. The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd represents the culmination of two decades of the mass-media mindset within institutional Church filmmaking. Essentially a sequel to Legacy, this film was also conceived by Church authorities, was written and directed by Kieth Merrill, and premiered in 70mm in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. And where Legacy placed fictional characters in a pioneer milieu, Testaments did the same with the Book of Mormon, introducing fictitious characters and scenarios to a scriptural context. This is intercut with scenes taken directly and literally from scriptural accounts of Christ’s mortal ministry. The scale was mammoth; it remains the largest production the Church has ever undertaken. It premiered on March 24, 2000, fourteen days after God’s Army, and continued
Video and Distribution on VHS

Church production in the Fourth Wave focused on larger films with subjects of epic scope intended for theatrical exhibition or mass exposure through television. But films made or repackaged for small-scale exhibition exponentially extended the reach of Church media in this era—chiefly through the phenomenon of VHS tapes. As with the 16mm films of the Third Wave, Fourth Wave videotapes were efficiently distributed to Church units and seminary classrooms and at affordable prices by Church Distribution Center outlets. Videotapes also made possible a much broader use of film in proselytizing.

Aging content received new life through videotape. The BYU studio’s large catalog of films was transferred to VHS, comprising nearly thirty Church Films volumes between 1983 and 1988; other compilations, generally thematic in nature, have continued to the present. Also in the 1980s, use of video flourished by way of the expanding Church Educational System, essentially the last Church organization to implement the use of visual media. From creating still filmstrips, CES progressed to becoming the Church’s leading venue for the use of video in instruction. Curriculum
and organization underwent major changes in the early 1980s, and by 1984 the sentimental narrative format—often dismissed as “Mormon soap operas”—was replaced by more doctrinally oriented material, beginning with the “filmmstrip-on-video” series, *Hold to the Rod* (1984–88). By the sixth of twelve planned installments, the series made the transition to full-motion video. Production, as always, was done at BYU. In 1986 the first start-to-finish video series, *I Will Lead You*, was released, and the filmstrip, in use since the 1930s, finally disappeared from LDS media. CES films, colloquially called “seminary videos,” have continued to be made and revised ever since, creating an enormous catalog of titles that have been extensively used in Sunday School and other venues.\(^\text{110}\)

The Church Educational System was not the only Church entity to produce content for the mass distribution of Mormon videos. In 1985 the Church’s Missionary Department developed the concept of Direct Gospel Messages, or DGMs, which were essentially a continuation of Bonneville’s television specials (discussed below) but with greater relevancy to Church proselytizing efforts. Starting in 1987, these would generally premiere in a satellite broadcast and then be distributed on VHS cassettes to—or through—full-time missionaries, who not only had their own copies to screen but increasingly delivered tapes to viewers who had answered the Church’s television advertisements. The first DGM, *Our Heavenly Father’s Plan* (essentially a remake of *Man’s Search for Happiness*), was finished in 1987, followed by *Together Forever* (1988), arguably the Church’s most prominent production until *Legacy*. Others that followed included *What Is Real* (1989), *Labor of Love* (1989), *The Prodigal Son* (1990), and *On the Way Home* (1992).

These productions circulated widely along with other videos of Church satellite broadcasts. Such broadcasts and videotapes have included not only films but a host of training programs intended for various auxiliaries and Church leaders. Often, when a broadcast was not to be distributed on VHS, assigned members of local units recorded them live, then labeled and archived this programming in their ward and stake libraries. These taped programs, along with prepackaged videos, have long served as an important component within Church instruction and local missionary work.

**Broadcasting**

Generally speaking, Church films of the Fourth Wave intended for distribution on video cassettes became more pointedly doctrinal and were intended for the direct instruction of Mormon youth or potential converts who were learning fundamental LDS history and beliefs. In contrast,
Fourth Wave Church films and programs, primarily by KSL-TV and Bonneville Communications, that were intended for public broadcasting outlets took more of a general character or simply conveyed profamily or prosocial messages loosely connected with the Church.

Just as the development of a strong distribution and exhibition network in the Second Wave led inevitably to Church film production in the Third, the growth of Church radio and television in the Second and Third Waves led naturally to the Church’s broadcast entities producing their own content. In the 1970s and 1980s, KSL and Bonneville continued to focus on broadcasting general conference, Tabernacle Choir programs, and the Homefront television spots, which became a hallmark of Church public relations from their first airing in 1972. But in 1974 a soft-sell television special entitled A Christmas Child, syndicated throughout the United States, was successful enough to pave the way for subsequent productions, and these soon became the center of Bonneville’s dramatic work. In November 1976, Bonneville aired a variety show called The Family . . . and Other Living Things featuring the pop-singing Osmond family. Though this program

The BYU Motion Picture Studio film crew on the set of a Homefront television spot (1973). In the 1970s and 1980s, this series of 30-second public service announcements helped establish the Church’s family-oriented image. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
Jimmy Stewart reviews the script of Mr. Krueger's Christmas (1980). Stewart gives a masterful performance as Willy Krueger, wavering believably between distracted feeble-mindedness and sharp mental acuity. Among Latter-day Saints, this is one of his best-known roles—often coupled with his other great Christmas film, It's a Wonderful Life (1946). LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

has long been forgotten, the commercials that accompanied it proved crucial: a few spots offered an abbreviated Family Home Evening manual through a telephone order, marking the beginning of “media contacting” that has since included hundreds of spots aired around the globe.

Though Bonneville created many other programs throughout the ensuing years, their most significant was another holiday special, Mr. Krueger’s Christmas. A national audience was guaranteed when James Stewart agreed to play the title role, helping make it probably Bonneville’s most-seen production. A Walter Mittyesque rumination on the meaning of Christmas, it premiered on December 21, 1980, and has been rejuvenated annually through television broadcasts, VHS sales, and a twenty-fifth anniversary DVD included in the December 2005 Ensign magazine.

Many subsequent Bonneville productions sought to imitate Krueger’s success through association with Christmas or Easter. The most obvious of these was Norah’s Christmas Gift (1989), which starred Celeste Holm, a lesser-known Hollywood star, and again featured the Tabernacle Choir, Temple Square, and a protagonist dealing with the trials of old age. Further specials included The Nativity/Luke 2 (1986) and the animated The Other Wise Man (1989) for Christmas, and The Last Leaf, The Road to Emmaus (airing together in 1984), and Easter Dream (1990) for Easter.

Church broadcasting significantly widened its audience when it came to cable television in 1988. That September the Church became one of twelve charter members in a nondenominational religious cable television network, the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network (VISN, subsequently the Faith and Values Channel, the Odyssey Channel, and then the secular Hallmark Channel). Bonneville had to supply a great deal of the station’s content. Past installments of Music and the Spoken Word and archived
films and programs such as sermons aired on VISN, but Bonneville also created original material. Perhaps the most unique was a shortened version of an LDS sacrament meeting called *LDS Worship Service* that featured a specially created ward with an actual bishop and other lay officers, each of whom had been called and set apart as in a traditional unit. Some of the Church’s other main series have been *Families Are Forever* (1989), the adolescent lifestyle show *Center Street* (begun in 1992), and an adult version called *Times and Seasons* (begun in 1991), named for the early Church periodical and including half-hour episodes on societal issues such as Sunday worship, pornography, and interfaith help of the homeless. Individual specials have also abounded, and in general VISN represented a major initiative (ironically little known among Church members) aimed not at proselytizing but at outreach and social betterment. This was consistent with the large-scale Church humanitarian efforts that got underway during this time, with Church members often featured as global good neighbors in news coverage that has increasingly showed Mormons involved with humanitarian and disaster-cleanup efforts.

**Independent Mormon Movies**

**The Feature Film Returns**

The quest for a Mormon feature film continued unabated from the momentum of the 1960s, even though no viable films had emerged in that decade. The Joseph Smith project mentioned earlier provided much of the impetus and spilled into the private sector. A great deal of publicity surrounded the potential multimillion-dollar picture *The American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith*, an independent film that was slated for a July 1976 release but apparently never even reached production. Within a single year, attention had shifted from Joseph Smith to his successor as the film *Brigham* began to be publicized. As with the Church’s Joseph project, a core of Latter-day Saints, this time principally David R. Yeaman at Sunset Films, looked outside the Church for their principal personnel, including writer/producer Philip Yordan and director Thomas McGown. The film attempts to be a faithful biopic, an answer to the doubtful prophet portrayed in Fox’s 1940 *Brigham Young*. Ironically, much of the plot copied that film, particularly in the depiction of a doubting outsider accompanying the Mormons throughout their journeys; this time, however, the film climaxed with this character’s conversion.
Brigham premiered in Salt Lake City on November 19, 1977, and immediately ran into trouble. Although some reviews were good, many Latter-day Saints reacted negatively to its low production values (including stock footage lifted from films like Brigham Young itself), its corny humor, and its unsophisticated aesthetic. Eventually the film was withdrawn, reworked, and re-released in January 1978 as the “new” Brigham. In 1983 its name was again temporarily changed to Savage Journey for a television release. While Brigham is therefore often considered a black sheep of LDS cinema, it must be noted that the film has many strong points, particularly the relationship between Joseph and Brigham, and was the first major American theatrical film spearheaded by Mormons and dealing with Mormonism since Corianton, which had suffered an even worse fate.

The middling success of Brigham was not a deterrent to other potential filmmakers. Some, like Lyman Dayton, worked on mainstream projects that they hoped to inject increasingly with Mormonism. Others once again attempted to create an independent Mormon-themed feature. One of these was John Linton, an aspiring filmmaker who undertook an ambitious first production with the picture Perilous Journey (1983), which tells the fictionalized story of the historical Samuel Pucell family who journeyed in the Willie Handcart Company of 1856. In contrast to Yeaman’s production of Brigham, Linton eschewed Hollywood assistance in favor of local, faithful Latter-day Saints. Happily, the film is technically equal to Brigham and in many ways more endearing through the amateur performances themselves. Filmed on 16mm, it was briefly released in theaters in 1983 (distribution was handled by a young music company called Excel Entertainment that would become a prominent film distributor in the Fifth Wave). In September 1984, Perilous Journey was shown on television and released on

Director John Linton in a publicity photo for Perilous Journey (1984). Linton sits at a flatbed Steenbeck editing table. This film represents a tradition of amateur independent Mormon films created as labors of love in which cast and crew filled many roles. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
VHS. Linton’s film, though flawed and often quaint, is vastly superior to many theatrical films of the Fifth Wave but unfortunately remains largely unknown today.

**Independent Videos**

Independent videos by and about Mormons in the Fourth Wave were many and diverse but can generally be divided into four types corresponding to their intended distribution: (1) documentary films made for television, (2) video productions sold through the growing Mormon retail market, (3) less-commercial films targeting special interest groups, and (4) noncommercial amateur films. Such distinctions can help organize the otherwise chaotic assortment of Fourth Wave video productions, but it must be remembered that many films will defy placement in any single category. Indeed, Fourth Wave video productions were strongly characterized by the blurring of distinctions between amateur and professional productions, and those meant for broadcast, VHS, personal or ward exhibition, or other distribution platforms.

Independent Mormon documentaries, for instance, reached regional and sometimes national television distribution in both the United States and Canada—a professional accomplishment—as individual Church members (cinematic amateurs often simply fulfilling Church callings) created documentaries or documentary series about the Church in their geographical area. On a more professional level, BYU Instructional Television, KBYU, and other Church-related entities created many excellent films; foremost among these was a 1979 KSL documentary (mentioned here because of its secular nature) entitled *Mormon Women and Depression*, which examined how an LDS lifestyle both contributes to and protects against depression.

Lee Groberg and his screenwriter, Heidi Swinton, have become well known for their historical documentaries. Often deemed a Mormon equivalent of historical documentarian Ken Burns, Groberg began his historical productions in 1991 with *American Gunmaker*, a film on John Browning. His topics have gradually moved through Utah history to explicitly devotional subjects, often tying releases into historical anniversaries, as with *Trail of Hope* for the 1997 Pioneer Sesquicentennial.

By distributing his films on VHS, or more recently DVD, after their initial broadcast, Groberg wisely joined ranks with arguably the most popular and profitable works of the Fourth Wave, videos released within the Mormon retail market. In the 1980s and 1990s Mormons had advanced Mormon literature into a $100-million annual market well served by retail stores dotting LDS population centers. Direct sales were also profitable.
Along with Mormon novels, music, and kitsch came the widely successful independent Mormon movie intended for home viewing.

By the 1990s many Utah-based companies produced Mormon videos en masse, usually in series, thus making this decade the age of the corporation and making mass production a characteristic of the Mass Media Era. Perhaps the first such firm was Eagle Systems and its VHS series *Stories from the Book of Mormon* (1985), followed by *The Spiritual History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1989). Far better known, however, was the Living Scriptures Company, which was founded by Jared F. Brown and Seldon O. Young in Ogden in 1974 to market Mormon-themed audio material. The company came to the fore in 1987 through a series of half-hour animated cartoons of Book of Mormon stories, directed by former Disney director Richard Rich. Several other animated and documentary series have followed. Covenant Communications Inc. also began in the 1970s with scriptural audiocassettes and became a major publisher and minor film producer, as with its *The Church History Video Tour* series in 1992 and 1993. Deseret Book acquired Covenant and its sister company, Seagull Book & Tape, in late 2006. How this merger will affect future Covenant projects and products remains to be seen.

Because video production is relatively inexpensive to create, it accommodates more diverse subjects and can target special interest groups, such as the many people attracted to Mormon apologetics and the teachings of scholars such as Hugh Nibley, featured in the aforementioned *The Faith of an Observer*. As mentioned, this film was coproduced by the BYU Motion Picture Studio and FARMS. Now a part of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU, FARMS has since become something of a minor film producer, releasing dozens of taped lectures and documentaries on archeological subjects.

Two other productions—both shot on film—depict Mormon women and children and represent some of the finest work within the Mormon cinematic canon. *Reflections* (1978), a feature-length film produced by LDS women in southern California, was a meditation on Mormon feminism during the Equal Rights Amendment controversy; and T. C. Christensen’s fifteen-minute documentary, *The Mouths of Babes* (1980), simply featured delightful interviews with young LDS children on gospel subjects. Though specific in their subject matter, these films certainly were not marketed exclusively to women and children. *The Mouths of Babes*, in particular, has had a vibrant and successful career being sold on commercial VHS and DVD.

*Reflections* serves as a wonderful example of the quality and scope of amateur Mormon film in the Fourth Wave. Amateur productions boomed
during this period, much as they had in the 1930s, but now they were, predictably, on a much larger scale. With the proliferation of inexpensive consumer-level video equipment, increasing numbers of Mormons began to document not just themselves and their families but important periods and events in Church history. While purists may not consider such activities as videotaping a children’s presentation in church to be Mormon cinema proper, the advent of home video has personalized Church members’ experience with film in ways that institutional or professional Mormon films never could.

The blurred line between amateur and professional productions led to one of the most distinctive genres of the Fourth Wave, theater-on-video. In 1983 Scott Anderson recorded a live performance of his play *The Best Two Years of My Life* for sale on VHS (later remade as a Fifth Wave feature film); in 1984 Gary B. Lundberg filmed a performance of Janice Kapp Perry’s *It’s a Miracle!* and soon various other titles were adapted, some taped on stage but many done in original productions. The best known is certainly Bob Williams’s 1989 adaptation of Doug Stewart and Lex de Azevedo’s *Saturday’s Warrior*. Stewart and de Azevedo did not participate directly and were reportedly rather disappointed the production was so stage-bound, but the video’s popular success equaled that of the play’s 1974 stage premiere, and an entire generation grew up unaware that it had ever existed in any other form. Stage-to-video adaptation has become an established genre of Mormon film continuing to the present, including *The Farley Family Reunion* (1990), *Polly: A One-Woman Musical* (1993), *Eliza and I* (1997), *Hancock County* (2003), *Sixth Wife* (2004), *Book of Gold* (2005), *Discoveries* (2005), and the forthcoming *1856: Long Walk Home* (2007).
The Pioneer Sesquicentennial, 1997

If the 1947 Utah Centennial was the crest of the Second Wave, then the 1997 Pioneer Sesquicentennial was the tsunami of the Fourth. This year represented the largest surge in Mormon filmmaking, both within the Church and without, in the history of Mormonism. It gave common purpose and subject matter to all LDS filmmakers, unifying their projects into a collective movement hitherto unseen, and created an event for all outsiders to document. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, “The Church’s sesquicentennial celebrations were the most significant thrust in bringing the Church out of obscurity in its history.”

The celebration’s prominence had many causes, including Church growth since 1947, the shrewd name-change from 1947’s statewide “Utah Centennial” to 1997’s more global “Pioneer Sesquicentennial,” and the new Church President Gordon B. Hinckley’s proactive engagement with the media. Momentum had been building throughout the early 1990s, with many films on early Church history and its growth in various regions. This was augmented by Utah’s statehood centennial in 1996. In 1997, the first major film was the Church’s short *Faith in Every Footstep*, which featured the First Presidency on the Mormon Trail and premiered during the services of the April general conference. The Church’s other main film was Russell Holt’s *An Ensign to the Nations*, which tells the stories of the first Church members in South Korea, Africa, and other areas.

If any independent film took center stage, however, it was Lee Groberg’s *Trail of Hope*, which aired nationally on PBS in July. But this was joined by a plethora of other films, including Ken Verdoia’s biographical documentary *Brigham Young*; Caroline Prohosky’s dance film *Woman, the Pioneer*; Richard Dutcher and Elizabeth Hansen’s one-woman film *Eliza and I*; Kevin Mitchell’s documentary series *Legacy West* for Covenant; and Gerry Troyna’s BBC documentary *Wagon Train: Journey of the Modern Pioneers*. In addition, the Church Public Affairs Department recorded news coverage in Belgium, France, Japan, and Spain, and full-fledged documentaries in Austria, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Germany (three films), Hungary, Italy, the Philippines, Poland, Romania, and Russia. It is impossible to judge the full effect of the sesquicentennial, but the increase in cinematic activity constituted one of its primary features, illustrating the extent to which cinema had come to permeate and represent Mormon culture.
Mormons in the Mainstream Industry

During the Fourth Wave, the Mormon presence in the mainstream film industry predictably swelled. For instance, productions in Utah received a boost when the Osmond family opened a state-of-the-art studio in Orem to film the Donny & Marie television variety show (1976–79) and other productions. Church President Spencer W. Kimball dedicated the studio on November 1, 1977, illustrating the symbiosis between media and the Church by this point.

In California and elsewhere, Latter-day Saints working in the mainstream film industry were such a broad and diverse group that it is possible to mention only a few of them. LDS actors, for example, included Terry Moore, who has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and once claimed to have been secretly married to Howard Hughes; child star Michael Lookinland, who played Bobby on television’s The Brady Bunch; and Jimmy Espinoza, who in the early 1980s served as president of Nosotros, the premiere organization of Hispanic filmmakers. In television, brothers Les and Glen Charles created the sitcom Taxi in 1978, followed by Cheers in 1982, which ran until 1993 and proved to be one of the most popular and influential shows of the decade. Other industry insiders have included executives like Edwin Catmull of Pixar and Kay Whitmore of Kodak; successful producers like Gerald Molen, who won a Best Picture Oscar for Schindler’s List (1993); and numerous creative artists such as video game composer Chance Thomas. The group, in other words, is as diverse as the industry is large.

In the 1970s, in fact, so many Church members were working in the film and television industries that some attempted to organize. By 1976 BYU was compiling a list of all LDS professionals in film and theater, and in southern California Robert Starling organized the Associated Latter-day Media Artists (ALMA) with Gordon Jump, Donna King Conkling, and others. This group sought to improve the LDS presence in media production through networking, awards, and other means; it thrived for several years before eventually being replaced by other interests. Today there are informal LDS artist associations, including filmmakers, in Los Angeles, New York, and other cities. In 2002 Richard Dutcher and Jon-giorgi Enos attempted to create a Utah Filmmakers’ Association, but it was never able to get off the ground, and in January 2006 Christian Vuissa announced an LDS Film Academy as a training and networking organization for LDS filmmakers.

Two of the many Latter-day Saints who gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s were Don Bluth and Neil LaBute. Bluth moved up through the ranks at Disney animation throughout the 1970s, and many
considered him the future of the company, but in 1979 he led off a corps of deserters to start his own Don Bluth Studios. Their second feature attempt, *The Secret of NIMH* (1982), caught Steven Spielberg’s attention and secured Bluth funding and distribution for his next film, *An American Tail* (1986), which proved a critical favorite and box office success. Subsequent titles include some failures but also strong successes like *The Land Before Time* (1988), *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989), and Twentieth Century Fox’s *Anastasia* (1997).

Neil LaBute was born in Detroit and converted to the Church while studying theater at BYU in the 1980s. His student play *In the Company of Men* won an award from the Association for Mormon Letters, and he converted it to film in 1997. Its success—and his distinctive vision that appears at once dark yet highly moralizing—vaulted him to indie celebrity status and allowed him to adapt another play, *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998). Other stage plays, adaptations, and mainstream pictures penned by others followed, including a Showtime channel adaptation, filmed during several live performances, of his play *bash* (2000), which is LaBute’s only piece to deal explicitly with the Church (although some critics assert that Mormonism informs all of his work). Because of its subject matter, however, the Church disfellowshipped him, and eventually he asked that his name be removed from the Church’s records. His career has continued unabated—in 2001 *The Shape of Things* premiered in London (it was adapted to film in 2003). Although his most recent film, a 2006 remake of the 1973 horror film *The Wicker Man*, did not garner praise equal to his earlier self-authored work, he shows no sign of slowing down.

**Mainstream Depictions of Mormons**

Fourth Wave films made by those outside the Church have generally followed two paths in depicting Mormons, with infinite degrees of variance. Documentaries and other informational films tend to treat the Church fairly and positively, while fictional films have often returned to stereotypes, nineteenth-century fear-mongering, and misrepresentations.

It is perhaps best to look at documentaries as a group, since no individual titles stand out for their depiction of Mormonism. Ross McElwee’s landmark 1986 film *Sherman’s March* is probably the best known. However, its stance on Mormonism, though extremely positive, comes within a single sequence of a much larger film. Similarly, Alistair Cooke’s series *America* (1973) and Ken Burns’s *The West* (1996) touched on the Church,
but productions that focused on Mormonism exclusively are largely forgotten today.

One non-LDS filmmaker who has made Mormonism a major feature of his oeuvre is Ken Verdoia, today a senior producer at KUED public television at the University of Utah. Verdoia is interested in Mormonism not only because of his proximity to its geographical center, but because of its remarkable history and status as a microcosm of the American experience. Accordingly, many of his documentaries, often executed as long-format journalism, focus on historical aspects of the Church, including titles like *A Matter of Principle: Polygamy in the Mountain West* (1990), *Utah: The Struggle for Statehood* (1996), and *Battalion* (2003). Many Latter-day Saints are unsettled by his approach, which often mixes politics and economics with religion, but he avers that this fused dichotomy “speaks to the very heart of the Church/State dilemma that [he finds] so compelling.”

The New Anti-Mormon Film

We have already seen the roots of a new anti-Mormon film era emerging in the 1960s, one that grew to full fruition by the 1980s. Many Latter-day Saints, however, would dispute that such an era even exists, arguing that most “anti-Mormon” films are merely mature, honest, or well-rounded looks at Mormon culture. This point of difference, apparent since *Mahlzeiten*, where some Church members are offended and some are not, lies at the heart of this new period’s complexity (contrasted with the universal Mormon outcry against films like *A Mormon Maid*). There are various reasons for this mixed response, but perhaps foremost among them is this: Because many modern Mormon exploitation films still use caricatures and stereotypes—be they nineteenth-century models like polygamy, blood atonement, and Danites, or more recent perceptions like political conservatism, moral hypocrisy, or kitschy material culture—Mormon audience members fail to see themselves on screen and therefore never feel assailed.

The main event that made such films possible was the end of Hollywood’s Production Code and the advent of a ratings system in 1968. But while this allowed for looser depictions of sex, violence, and religious misrepresentations, it did not account for mounting interest in Mormonism. For that, we must return to the causes of anti-Mormonism in the 1800s and 1910s, when the Church served as a convenient foil in America’s burgeoning quest for self-identification. With dramatically increasing growth and political presence since the 1960s, Mormonism again became an Other worthy of fear and attention. Terryl Givens cites the Church’s
political involvement in issues like the MX missile controversy and the Equal Rights Amendment, then adds: “One must here note that the Missouri Wars took place in a decade that saw the early church explode in membership from its six founders to thirty thousand members”—growth that threatened the state’s political stability. The modern echoes are obvious. With extremely optimistic predictions of Church growth by non-LDS demographers like Rodney Stark, filmmakers as diverse as comedian Trey Parker and documentarian Helen Whitney find it quite logical to address Mormonism as an important social phenomenon.

How such filmmakers do so is simultaneously the same yet different from their counterparts in the 1910s, as evolving norms within both the Church and American society have played an ironic about-face in the intervening decades. Since at least the 1950s, Latter-day Saints have moved to the center of American society, but this move occurred at the very time when the center was displaced by the privileging of the margins. “In the nineteenth century, Mormons . . . were portrayed as promiscuous misfits in a Victorian society. In the 1990s the typical Mormon character has become a Victorian misfit in a promiscuous society,” says Michael Austin.

Today Mormons are easy stock characters for moral and political conservatives, and hence easy—if unfulfilling—targets for politically liberal, permissive, or sexually liberated agendas.

A final cause of the new anti-Mormon film age is video itself. It is arguable that the 1980s resurgence in anti-Mormonism in both film and literature was due in large part to the close relationship between television movies—especially docudramas and true-crime films—and similar types of pulp (primarily detective) fiction, which, since 1979, had seen a resurgence of Mormon characters exhibiting the same old anti-Mormon stereotypes from the 1800s. Furthermore, VHS gave an affordable outlet to those filmmakers who truly desired to damage the Church. The most famous of these was Ed Decker and his film *The Godmakers*, released in January 1983. Although Decker, a former Church member, advertised this as a legitimate documentary, it was roundly denounced by third-party organizations as shallow propaganda. An initial furor arose within the Church, but the film has had no lasting effect except, ironically, in forcing subsequent anti-Mormon videos, such as *The Lost Book of Abraham* (2002), to evince more faux objectivity.

Mainstream productions have been much more enigmatic in their approach. Alfred Hitchcock’s final film, *Family Plot* (1976), for instance, had the villain kill his Latter-day Saint parents in the backstory, but their religion holds no discernible purpose in the plot or influence in the villain’s adult activities. One scene, however, contains significant LDS material: At
a graveside service, the camera follows the meandering protagonist while a visibly non-Mormon priest reads 2 Nephi 9:20–21 from the Book of Mormon. The passage deals with Christ’s victory over the grave and imbues the film with syntactic density and well-placed irony; Hitchcock and screenwriter Ernest Lehman would have studied the Book of Mormon carefully to find such a perfectly suitable text. This is one of the most complex uses of Mormonism in cinema, but that same year also saw the western comedy The Duchess and the Dirtwater Fox, which baldly reverted to old stereotypes by depicting Mormons as being staunch like Puritans, avaricious like Jews, and lecherous like, well, Mormons.

But it was on the television screen that the anti-Mormon or Mormon-exploitation film truly came into its own. Michael Austin has noted seven major news stories between 1979 and 1989, such as a series of forgeries and murders by Mark Hofmann, and points out their crucial effect on fiction because they “occurred exactly when the true-crime novel was developing into a recognizable subcategory of detective fiction.” “In fact,” he adds, “Mormonism plays a major role in a book that could plausibly be considered the most important true-crime novel ever written: Norman Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song (1979), winner of the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and one of the genre’s foundational texts.” In 1982 the novel was made into a television movie starring Tommy Lee Jones, and other television films, often adapted from pulp literature or recent headlines, followed, including Child Bride of Short Creek (1981), the West German miniseries Paradise Reclaimed (1981), Messenger of Death (1988), The Avenging Angel (1995), Shot in the Heart (2001), and many others, with The Elizabeth Smart Story (2003) one of the most recent.

From these roots, Mormonism and its offshoots became central to numerous theatrical films, including space-age satire in Trent Harris’s Plan 10 from Outer Space (1994), Rodney Dangerfield’s polygamous woes in My 5 Wives (2000), a missionary’s struggle to accept his homosexuality in C. Jay Cox’s Latter Days (2003), and even modern remakes of old favorites in TNT’s Riders of the Purple Sage (1996) for cable television and Ian Allen’s silent, black-and-white Trapped by the Mormons (2005) for the university/art house circuit. Films with verbal references to Mormonism and minor LDS characters are far more numerous and, generally, far more prejudiced.

Within this milieu, perhaps the most notorious Mormon-related production of the Fourth Wave was Trey Parker’s Orgazmo (1997), in which he plays a missionary induced to perform in a pornographic film in order to pay for an expensive temple wedding with his faithful sweetheart. The very title and NC-17 rating made the film scandalous within Mormonism
at the time, but in ways it actually boded well for the future. The recycling of the nineteenth-century character of the oversexed Mormon elder into parody and farce follows traditional generic patterns and therefore suggests that this particular stereotype has finally exhausted itself. Just as interestingly, while *Orgazmo* has its share of inaccuracies and cheap barbs, in the end Mormon values are rewarded and the faith defended, something that has also proven true—with the expected jokes and irony—in Parker’s subsequent project, the animated television series *South Park*. But *Orgazmo* had one other unintended effect as well: like *A Victim of the Mormons*, it served as an immediate catalyst for Mormon filmmakers to reject their representations in mainstream productions and take up arms to create their own cinematic image. In any case, it would be Latter-day Saints themselves using missionaries much more creatively as subject matter—in both comical and tragic modes—within the first and many subsequent films of the Fifth Wave.

**Fourth Wave Reprise**

The Fourth Wave was obviously a time when institutional and other positive LDS films gained a vitality that allowed them to compete with their critical counterparts. Under Presidents Kimball, Benson, Hunter, and Hinckley, American Latter-day Saints, including the filmmakers among them, acquired the cultural confidence necessary to assert themselves as a legitimate and unfairly marginalized component of American society. Cinema, the populist art of the new millennium, was the logical place to express such sentiments. Pressure was building behind the dam, and all it would take was a single film to make it burst.
Writer-director Richard Dutcher, unquestionably the dominant personality in the past decade of Mormon cinema, on location with actors Jo-Sei Ikeda and Ignacio Serricchio for his film States of Grace (2005). Dutcher—who has worked as writer, actor, producer, director, and now editor—is credited with launching a new wave of Mormon film with his breakthrough production God’s Army in 2000, which not only set the stage for multiple theatrical releases of Mormon-themed pictures, but also sought to increase their realism and dramatic depth beyond the limited depictions of Mormons in Hollywood films or, conversely, institutional productions in the style of Judge Whitaker. © Main Street Movie Co.
The Fifth Wave: Cultural and Commercial Viability (2000–Present)

The Fifth Wave of Mormon cinema is the current period, in which a culturally robust and commercially vibrant new art form is beginning to emerge. Its most obvious manifestation is in the stream of Mormon-themed theatrical feature films, produced independently of the Church, made by and for Latter-day Saints. Richard Dutcher’s much-celebrated God’s Army, released in March 2000, made him widely recognized as the father of this new movement in Mormon film, but his groundbreaking work actually marks a return to the past. The LDS filmmakers of the First Wave also sought to create 35mm films to be distributed through commercial theaters to a paying public. Mormon film has in many ways come full circle, with Latter-day Saints of the Fifth Wave attempting large theatrical productions at a time when anti-Mormon films are once again more visible in the mainstream. There are, to be sure, several differences between the present and the First Wave: the Church’s increased size and prominence, the existence of prolific institutional filmmaking apparatuses, and the continued effect of electronic filmmaking and distribution methods. But perhaps the defining difference was Dutcher’s success in reaching LDS audiences; he proved the existence of a profitable niche market for Mormon-themed movies produced independently of both Hollywood and the institutional Church.

The creation of that market has as much to do with the new vitality of Mormon cinema as LDS filmmakers creating films on Mormon subjects. A paying Mormon public has given filmmakers courage to tell more and more varied Mormon stories and has given producers a motive to continue backing such films. Those who continue attributing to Dutcher the existence of Mormon cinema in the first decade of the twenty-first century are ignoring the last decades of the prior century during which the Mormon retail market got its legs and direct-to-video productions both satisfied and sharpened an appetite for film within the culture. The Fifth Wave comes at a time in the development of Mormon culture when there is a sufficient critical mass of Mormon sponsors, Mormon population centers, and Mormon interest in the medium generally to make a return on investment viable.

Dutcher’s God’s Army proved to be the catalyst that tapped this potential. Some have attributed the success of this film to the novelty of making LDS missionaries the central subject of a theatrically released feature film,
Key Films of the Fifth Wave

- **God's Army** (2000, USA, director Richard Dutcher, 107 minutes). Richard Dutcher’s breakthrough film that revolutionized Mormon cinema and brought about the Fifth Wave.

- **The Other Side of Heaven** (2001, USA, director Mitch Davis, 113 minutes). The Fifth Wave’s first theatrical production not directed by Dutcher, this film signaled that an entire movement was underway.

- **The Singles Ward** (2002, USA, director Kurt Hale, 102 minutes). The first film by HaleStorm, this inaugurated the sub-genre of the goofy Mormon comedy, one of the dominant forms in the Fifth Wave thus far.

- **Angels in America** (2003, USA, director Mike Nichols, 352 minutes). This HBO miniseries adaptation of Tony Kushner’s Broadway play was a landmark production in terms of scope, prestige, and awards.

- **Napoleon Dynamite** (2004, USA, director Jared Hess, 95 minutes). This oddball comedy about high school misfits in Idaho became an unexpected international phenomenon.

- **New York Doll** (2005, USA, director Greg Whiteley, 78 minutes). The most significant documentary to date in the Fifth Wave; most critics agree it represents a huge stride forward for Mormon film in general.

- **States of Grace** (2005, USA, director Richard Dutcher, 128 minutes) Richard Dutcher’s third Fifth Wave film proved controversial but was critically regarded as one of the finest Mormon films to date.

- **Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration** (2005, USA, directors Gary Cook and T. C. Christensen, 60 minutes). This thematic sequel to Legacy and Testaments follows those films in scope and devotion with significant stylistic differences.

- **Big Love** (begun 2006, USA, various directors, a series of 60-minute episodes). This HBO television series has proven more popular—and highly seen—than any single film dealing with Mormonism.

- **The Mormons** (2007, USA, director Helen Whitney, 240 minutes) A landmark PBS documentary on Mormonism’s history and modern makeup; it aired on consecutive evenings on American Experience and Frontline.
and this may in fact account for initial interest in the movie, but the more important innovation (something equally evident in Dutcher’s following film, *Brigham City* [2001] and then his *States of Grace* [2005]) was aesthetic in nature. That is, Dutcher pushed past two-dimensional portrayals of Mormons so common in mainstream or institutional films and created characters and scenarios more reflective of believing Latter-day Saints and their genuine efforts to live their faith. Dutcher’s work filled a place left empty by the caricatures of Mormons within Hollywood films and the idealizations of Mormons in Church productions, and Latter-day Saints liked what he did. Others did, too; this authenticity has broadened the appeal of Dutcher’s stories beyond LDS audiences. He is recognized as a filmmaker who treats faith and spirituality seriously and does so through stories about the LDS people and faith that he knows.

The advent of successful independent Mormon feature films is the obvious breaking news of the current period, but with the Fifth Wave have come important changes in how Mormonism is being treated, not only in independent feature films but in mainstream and even in institutional Church movies. These three varieties of Mormon film—-independent, mainstream, and institutional—continue to be enormously contrastive, but in the Fifth Wave all of these are beginning to convey an increasingly complex understanding of Mormonism.

**Institutional Church Productions**

Institutional LDS film has in most respects continued the trends of the Fourth Wave into the Fifth. The Church’s broadcasting is spreading farther across the globe. Video remains the Church’s most important distribution method, with DVD replacing VHS. One innovative method of film distribution has been to include discs with issues of the Church’s primary English-language magazine, the *Ensign*.

The Church Audiovisual Department has continued to create seminary videos and other special programs. Many of these seem to have made a quantum leap in recent years in terms of dramatic and cultural sophistication. Historical figures like Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Martin Harris are now portrayed with greater depth and internal life, and modern films have recognized the international nature of the Church by setting productions in a variety of countries, for once making the English-speaking students read subtitles.

But thus far in the Fifth Wave, the Church’s only major production has been the feature film *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*, released
In the Church’s major Fifth Wave film about its founder, first-time actor Nathan Mitchell joins a long line of men who have portrayed the Prophet Joseph Smith. Image from the film *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration*, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

on December 17, 2005, in honor of the Prophet’s bicentennial six days later. Codirected by frequent collaborators T. C. Christensen and Gary Cook—together they had most recently remade the short 1976 film *The First Vision as The Restoration* (2004)—this commemorative film represents the culmination of thirty years’ effort by the Church to put the Joseph Smith story on the big screen. While not a commercial feature as the 1970s project was conceived, its high profile at the busy Joseph Smith Memorial Building and other LDS visitors’ centers throughout North America means that it will be seen by many more viewers than would have gone to a commercially released film, and the Church retains complete control in the process. Church leaders’ commitment to the Legacy Theater in particular is evident in the technical improvement of its projection apparatus. *Joseph* was first projected on a 2K Christie projector, the first digital projection done at Temple Square, and will eventually be shown at double that resolution.

As the successor to *Legacy* and *Testaments*, *Joseph* in many ways fits into their mold. It tells the life story of the Prophet with a combination of fictional and historical events, packed in as tightly as narratively possible. Its devotional nature often leans too far toward a hagiographic approach that ignores troubling aspects of Joseph’s life, such as polygamy. On the
positive side, there were certain stylistic innovations that enhanced the well-known Joseph Smith story. The directors deliberately chose to tone down the epic spectacle of Legacy and Testaments, creating a more intimate portrait of the prophet. Christensen, who also shot the film, used a smaller three-perforation Super-35mm stock instead of the 65mm employed with Kieth Merrill’s films. While the frame is still large and the glossy aesthetic of previous institutional films remains, certain components of the acting, framing, and particularly music serve to bring us into closer communion with Joseph than has been done with previous films. While some might not notice a change, and some will surely get caught up in the film’s many flaws, the depiction of Joseph Smith is arguably more sophisticated aesthetically than in previous Church films and marks a subtle but important change in how the Church is willing to have its founder understood. Though Joseph still often falls into the trap of heavy-handed hagiography, it also represents a move toward a more three-dimensional portrait of Joseph Smith.

**Mormons in Mainstream Films**

Mainstream depictions of Latter-day Saints in the Fifth Wave also reveal a subtle but important move from two- to three-dimensional portraits of Mormonism, though this may not be obvious initially. As noted above, mainstream depictions of Mormons in the Fourth Wave revived old stereotypes going back to nineteenth-century literature when Mormonism first became tabloid subject matter in the popular press. It may seem that Fourth and Fifth Wave depictions of Latter-day Saints in mainstream films merely echo First Wave films that milked the sensationalistic aspects of Mormonism as readily as they capitalized on the sensuality of Cleopatra or the violence of the Ku Klux Klan. In the Fourth Wave, television only expanded the demand and scope for such hackneyed approaches to Mormonism.

While it is true that sensationalized aspects of Mormonism such as polygamy, violence, and moral hypocrisy continue to sell in the Fifth Wave (as in Punch Drunk Love [2002], Chicago [2002], or the previously mentioned films My 5 Wives [2000] and Latter Days [2003]), these are increasingly inflected by the unavoidable and improved public image of the Church and the new social and political dimensions of its expanded size and legitimacy. Old stigmas remain, but increasingly more substantive treatments or objective critiques of Mormonism are appearing—particularly in documentary films. This bifurcation in the treatment of
Mormonism has continued in the Fifth Wave, amplified by increased media exposure of Mormonism—as in the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City and the 2007 presidential campaign of Mitt Romney—and by the sustained attention to Mormon subjects made possible through the wide reach of cable television series featuring Mormonism. Those series present obvious challenges to the image of the Church and are exploitative in their way. But unlike the vast majority of previous mainstream films depicting Mormonism, they also offer a more complex understanding of Mormonism and its relationship to American culture.

In December 2003, HBO aired *Angels in America*, its landmark mini-series of Tony Kushner’s play staged a decade earlier. Adapted by Kushner and director Mike Nichols, this six-hour work became one of the most seen and most critically recognized Mormon-related films in history (4.2 million viewers tuned in to its initial broadcast alone). Set in New York City in 1985, the plot intertwines stories of AIDS, homosexuality, Mormonism, Judaism, and politics to create an indicting portrait of America in the thralls of the new plague of HIV. There are three Latter-day Saint characters and several scenes set in the LDS visitors’ center on Columbus Avenue, but the film’s relationship to Mormonism goes much deeper, as indicated by the title itself. Most obviously, the central character, Prior Walter, is visited in his bedroom by an angel who unearths a metallic book from under his kitchen floor, provides him with “peep-stones” to read it, and commands him to spread its message.

Those Latter-day Saints aware of *Angels* have always found it inaccurate and often sacrilegious and offensive. Mormon critics, mainly discussing the stage version, have pointed out its shallow understanding of Mormon culture and theology and especially its lack of empathy toward its Mormon characters. All the other characters are eventually accepted into the tapestry of hope presented in the denouement, but Latter-day Saints—and conservatives—are either cast off or must shed their provincial Mormon and conservative identities. Jonathan Langford writes that Kushner’s “endorsement of difference . . . does not really extend to serious consideration of ideas that are different from his. Mormonism, conservatism—neither is really allowed a presence or voice in the play, despite their constant conjuration.” Michael Austin, while noting these deficiencies, has undertaken a much more sophisticated analysis to examine how the play’s worldview presents not only the LDS veneer of angels and prophets but is deeply rooted in LDS theology, including eternal corporeality, moral agency and its consequences, and other points. According to Austin, “If *Angels in America* can be said to have a theology at all, it is a theology that, while not overtly Mormon, has more than enough recognizably Mormon
elements to make it worthy of the attention of any Latter-day Saint scholar or critic.”

The diversity of these two critics’ responses is not so important as the discussion itself, signaling how far LDS response to unflattering depictions has evolved. Because of these films’ MPAA ratings or their presentation in outlets not regularly patronized by most American Mormons, many Latter-day Saints are unlikely to encounter them or, when they do, to feel they present any sort of threat to their religion. But Latter-day Saints such as Austin and Langford represent a maturing culture of Mormon film criticism. Independent Mormon periodicals such as Sunstone, Dialogue, or Irreantum and organizations such as the Association for Mormon Letters regularly critique and discuss films in their conferences and online forums. Whether filmmakers (within the faith or without) listen is another matter, but Mormon culture is ready as never before to engage, not merely dismiss, its critics working in this medium.

Upping the stakes recently is HBO’s primetime series Big Love (begun in March 2006 and now in its second season, with over 4.5 million viewers for the premiere episode). This series, imitating the tone of HBO’s Sex in the City or ABC’s Desperate Housewives, depicts the domestic trials of a middle-class husband and his three wives living in contemporary Salt Lake City. This time, the Church took the now rare step of reacting to the production, pushing for and getting a disclaimer that aired with the first episode, distancing the Church from polygamy and expressing concern about the effects of any positive portrayal thereof. Many Latter-day Saints have criticized the series for this reason and for its many glancing blows at contemporary (and historical) Mormon life. But the series may do more to critique than to reinforce stereotypes. Big Love depicts and plays off the differences among three distinct versions of Mormonism: first, fundamental polygamists in a rural compound led by an aging prophet whose latest wife is sixteen years old, a disturbing throwback to perceived nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy; second, mainstream Latter-day Saints, who appear as minor characters or more peripherally as part of the Utah setting; and third, the series’ central family, who have escaped the compound and attempt to enjoy suburban prosperity while hiding their polygamy from their mainstream Mormon neighbors. This complexity makes it hard to call Big Love an anti-Mormon production. The series has found a more receptive LDS audience than Angels in America, as many Church members have praised its few LDS characters, its commentary on the ramifications of Mormonism’s heritage, and even its positive depiction of faith, religion, and family values.
Ambiguous and thought-provoking productions like *Big Love* helped prepare Latter-day Saints for the PBS documentary *The Mormons*, which aired across America in two two-hour programs—on *American Experience* and *Frontline*—April 30 and May 1, 2007. The sheer scope of this production ranks it as perhaps the most important documentary on the Church in its history, placing it in the top echelon of publicly prominent films like *Brigham Young* and *Angels in America*. The film’s director, Helen Whitney, who specializes in religious documentaries, set out to explore the rich complexities of Mormonism, respectfully challenging its doctrines and culture while simultaneously praising its achievements and dispelling false notions about it as a parochial Western religion. Throughout the piece, Whitney and her coproducers managed to gather articulate and engaging speakers from a full spectrum of backgrounds and weave them together into an interesting and logical sequence. This balancing act and the subsequent respect the film gives the faithful was the main point praised in professional reviews, although reviewers also addressed the film’s inaccuracies and deficiencies. Among Mormons the film caused apprehension and then discussion, and, although the official Church response was both measured and gracious, the overall impression among members was decidedly mixed. Marlin K. Jensen, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and the official Church Historian (who therefore received a fair amount of screen time himself) said, “How are church leaders reacting? I think on balance, very favorably. How could you be displeased when you’ve been the subject of a nationwide television program, stretching over four hours for two evenings and when an in-depth treatment of an essence of the Church has been given? I think, in general, we’re very pleased.”

This probably wouldn’t have been the response if a similar production had been made as little as twenty years ago, let alone eighty, showing how far Mormonism, in cinema as elsewhere, has come in being perceived as a culture deserving critical analysis and respect.

As Latter-day Saints increase in prominence, other such productions—both positive and negative—are sure to follow. As of this writing, attention-getting events like the sesquicentennial of the Mountain Meadows Massacre (on September 11, 2007) and the burgeoning presidential ambitions of Mitt Romney intimate that 2007 will witness an interesting artistic exchange over Mormonism’s faults and merits. In theaters Christopher Cain’s Mountain Meadows Massacre film *September Dawn* (scheduled for release August 24, 2007), which stars Jon Voight, may prove rich in its cultural analysis of Mormonism, but at present trailers seem to indicate a potboiler, with all the stereotypes and narrative elements of First Wave anti-Mormon films, particularly *The Mormon* (1912), firmly intact.
Stereotypical Mormon characters continue to crop up in films like *Georgia Rule* (May 2007), and Trey Parker and Matt Stone of *Orgazmo* are taking yet another stab at the culture through an as-yet-untitled stage musical (done with Jeff Marx, writer of the play *Avenue Q*), aiming at a Broadway release in 2008. In short, as long as Mormonism continues to enlarge its presence in America and other countries, we will continue to see similar productions that evaluate, satirize, criticize, or attack it. This may seem disheartening to the faithful, who can expect at best uneven treatment of subjects they consider sacred, but the evolving nature of interest in Mormonism is critical. The Mountain Meadows Massacre will provide fodder for many films to come, but, as *The Mormons* demonstrates, non-Mormons are gradually finding more of interest in Mormonism than what stereotyped characters or hackneyed subjects have hitherto offered.

Like other minorities that have also suffered exploitation and misrepresentation, Latter-day Saints are now gaining legitimacy as subject matter in their own right. This was what Richard Dutcher believed possible and what galvanized his motive to innovate films about Mormons that would be more reflective of their actual lives and struggles. He proved to a paying public and to other filmmakers that the more authentic the depiction of Mormonism, the more engaging the movie will be.

**Independent Mormon Films**

A successful Mormon feature film has been the holy grail of Mormon cinema since the first decade of the twentieth century. So many LDS filmmakers had floundered for decades in pursuit of it. Why did Dutcher finally succeed with *God’s Army*? Certainly his personal vision and persistence were crucial, but many other factors clearly contributed. First, a sufficiently large Mormon market now existed to support independent Mormon films. Church membership was adequate in enough key areas to make theatrical runs long enough to approach a return on investment. Second, this return on investment became much more feasible given the thriving Mormon market for videos and DVDs. The video format not only offered continued revenues after the films had finished their theatrical runs, but it had also provided emerging filmmakers a less-expensive format in which to hone their skills before incurring the huge costs of a theatrically released film. Third, LDS filmmakers generally had the confidence now to produce films about their culture without designing them as proselytizing tracts; they could focus on films’ technical and narrative quality. Fourth, after generations of a Mormon cinematic presence, LDS
filmmakers finally had precedents to react against: On the one hand, they rejected the sentimentalism of classical institutional films, while on the other hand they also rejected the inaccurate depictions of Latter-day Saints in mainstream cinema, particularly recent films like *Orgazmo*. Fifth, the growth of the film program at Brigham Young University, combined with the religious education and general atmosphere at the university, provided a training ground that continues to produce a disproportionate number of filmmakers when compared with global Church membership.126

By the late 1990s, there were already indications of the approaching paradigm shift. Foremost among these were the many LDS videos that were steadily making a profit, but filmmakers were also creating longer and more polished productions than typical for video release, such as Michael Schaertl’s *Christmas Mission* and Rocco DeVilliers’s *Only Once* (both 1998). Such films were only a short step from the theaters. And finally, there was Dutcher himself.

**Richard Dutcher: Not in Kansas Anymore**

Richard Dutcher was born on May 10, 1964, into a Pentecostal family in Illinois. He joined the Church at age eight, eventually served a mission in Mexico, and graduated from BYU’s film program in 1988. His initial interest was in acting, which led him to screenwriting and finally directing. After graduation he moved to Los Angeles and spent five years making a feature called *Girl Crazy* (1994), a romantic comedy that sold to HBO but convinced Dutcher that such trivial material was not worth the personal cost involved in producing his own films. At an impasse, he was barbecuing in his backyard when he noticed the gay, lesbian, and other minority film listings in his newspaper. An epiphany struck: Mormons also constituted a niche market. A film made exclusively for Latter-day Saints could be financially successful. More importantly, it could galvanize an entire movement, eventually making Mormon films the world’s premiere works on issues of faith and spirituality. Now driven by a cause, Dutcher created Zion Films and went to work, but investors proved harder to convince. Hence, he directed *Eliza and I* in 1997 as a coproduction with KBYU while accumulating funds for a larger project. This took three more years, but by the end of 1999 *God’s Army* had wrapped for the tidy sum of $300,000.

When it opened in Utah on March 10, 2000, *God’s Army* hit the Mormon community like a lightning bolt. It was the top grossing film in the state its opening weekend, and it eventually earned $2.6 million at the domestic box office. Distribution quickly became more than Dutcher could handle, and thus the film was picked up by Excel Entertainment,
which, under the direction of Jeff Simpson and Dean Hale, would become just as important to the growth of Mormon cinema as Dutcher himself. Not only was *God’s Army* an amazing financial success, but it convinced a large contingency of LDS filmmakers that they also should produce Mormon pictures, which, of course, was one of Dutcher’s main intents.

Indeed, it is instructive to read *God’s Army* as metacinema, a manifesto calling the troops to order. The story deals with a new missionary in Los Angeles named Elder Allen, his senior companion Elder Dalton (played by Dutcher), and their rather extraordinary interactions with other missionaries and local residents. Much has been written about its symbolism and autobiographical content, but little has been said about its attempt to be a conscious repudiation of past—particularly institutional—Mormon cinema. This, however, is exactly the purpose of the film’s opening moments. It begins with Elder Allen’s arrival on an airplane from Middle America. He is picked up by two missionaries in a dingy van that would never appear in a Church film and is immediately affronted with the line, “You’re not in Kansas anymore, Elder.” This is of course a film reference in itself, but also could refer to the vast legacy of Judge Whitaker and other Church filmmakers. The line of dialogue is followed by a montage of point-of-view shots including strip joints, a police scuffle, and a black man in a wheelchair flipping off the camera, all accompanied by a rock and roll song with

lyrics—tellingly—about having arrived at a new place. Dutcher intends this to be as much about the Mormon audience’s journey as Elder Allen’s, an intention borne out in the rest of the film as he depicts missionaries as rounded characters with immaturities and foibles that, again, reject the traditional representations of institutional LDS films.

With God’s Army’s success, Dutcher consciously set the stage for a new movement in Mormon cinema. But while others began putting together their projects from scratch, he used his momentum to dive into his next film, Brigham City. A murder mystery set in a small Utah town, this opened on April 6, 2001, to critical acclaim but mixed commercial results. It eventually gained greater distribution than its predecessor but failed to turn a profit at the box office. Still, Dutcher was at the top of his game, and the week of Brigham City’s release he announced a multimillion-dollar Joseph Smith biopic called The Prophet. A verifiable movement was indeed underway, and by the end of 2001, other filmmakers began to fill out the ranks.

The Best Two Years: 2002–2004

The first of these filmmakers was director Mitch Davis with The Other Side of Heaven, released in Utah on December 14, 2001. An adaptation of John Groberg's memoir In the Eye of the Storm, about his missionary service in Tonga in the 1950s, this had been under way for four years, thus making the filmmakers’ ambition independent of God’s Army’s success. Their stakes were also somewhat higher: A budget around $7 million necessitated a major distribution effort, one eventually undertaken by Disney. The cost also created a need to reach a general as well as an LDS audience; this crossover desire would soon come to dominate the majority of Fifth Wave films, even when made on a fraction of this film’s budget.

The first new Mormon productions to follow Dutcher, however, were aimed squarely at Latter-day Saints. These began with The Singles Ward and Out of Step, both released in February 2002. Out of Step was a troubled but underrated film directed by Ryan Little. The Singles Ward was produced at the new company HaleStorm Entertainment, which had been cofounded by Dave Hunter and Kurt Hale, a grandson of Nathan and Ruth Hale, who adopted his mother’s maiden name and christened the entire company with the Hale legacy. The film, an autobiographical comedy by screenwriter John Moyer (Hale directed), addressed Mormonism by focusing on corny references to Utah culture such as Jell-O and minor local celebrities. Its story was uneven and its production values lower than the previous films, but it was funny, and its sheer novelty made it immensely
Mitch Davis’s *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001) adapted the missionary memoir of Elder John Groberg (played by Christopher Gorham, right). With its multimillion dollar budget, heavy advertising campaign, and eventual video distribution through Disney, this film represents the largest effort to date for an independent Mormon film to achieve mainstream success. © Excel Entertainment.

popular. It grossed over $1.2 million. This set off a brief string of formulaic movies—including Hale’s *The RM* (2003), *The Home Teachers* (2004), and *Church Ball* (2006)—that brought in increasingly tepid reviews but quickly established HaleStorm as a recognizable and often popular brand. A production arm called HaleStone, born of necessity when Excel refused to distribute *The Singles Ward*, has actually proven the company’s most profitable entity, and Eric Samuelsen has pointed out that the creation of a second distribution company actually signaled the advent of an LDS film *industry*, as competition was now a factor.128

Another event was equally critical in legitimizing an independent Mormon film culture, and this was the First International Young LDS Film Festival, held November 30 and December 1, 2001, in Provo. This was the brainchild of Austrian BYU film student Christian Vuissa, who worked indefatigably with a few volunteers and very little sponsorship to create a festival that included film and screenplay competitions, screenings, a forum and panel discussion, and other presentations. The festival, now simply called the LDS Film Festival, has shifted to January (to coincide with the Sundance Film Festival), is hosted at Orem’s SCERA Theatre, and has grown tremendously—2,400 patrons attended in 2005, 3,800 in 2006, and 4,800 in 2007. If this serves as a true barometer of interest in Mormon film, then the Fifth Wave’s future is bright. More importantly, the festival
itself stands poised to become a cultural center of Mormon film, as it not only brings Mormon film enthusiasts together into a community but will also influence future films in form and content.

In the commercial market, *The Singles Ward* and *Out of Step* set the trend for the first years of the Fifth Wave boom more than *The Other Side of Heaven* or Dutcher’s films did. Pictures generally were made by filmmakers much younger than Dutcher and Davis—mostly recent BYU film graduates—and were created quickly and with virtually no budgets in an attempt to capitalize on the mounting interest in Mormon movies, either avariciously or out of a sincere desire to depict Mormon faith and culture in film. Titles include *Charly* (2002), *Handcart* (2002), *Pride and Prejudice* (2003), *The Book of Mormon Movie* (2003), *The Legend of Johnny Lingo* (2003), *Saints and Soldiers* (2004), *Baptists at Our Barbeque* (2004), *The Work and the Glory: Pillar of Light* (2004), and others. Artistic quality varied and commercial success generally did not come until video release, if at all, but audiences were occasionally receptive and by 2004 the films appeared to be improving. In particular, *The Best Two Years* in February and *Saints and Soldiers* in August were critical and popular favorites. The former film’s writer and director, Scott Anderson, found himself in the enviable position of having Excel and HaleStone bidding over distribution rights, a healthy competition that boded well for the future quality of LDS films.

*The Work and the Glory* pictures, based on a popular series of novels by Gerald Lund, promised enough potential that they evidently rekindled the Deseret Book Company’s interest in film; on November 15, 2004—nine

days before the first film’s premiere—the company acquired Excel Entertainment, thus returning Deseret Book to its cinematic roots that had flourished under Hamer Reiser. In response, both *The Work and the Glory*’s main financier, Larry H. Miller, and Richard Dutcher created their own distribution companies in 2005: Miller’s Vineyard Distribution in June and Dutcher’s Main Street Movie Company in October. Though many have bemoaned Deseret Book’s inevitably conservative approach, the addition of its financial muscle to Mormon film and the proliferation of four major distribution companies promise to be beneficial. This growth also resonated within HaleStorm, which has emerged as the strongest new company of the Fifth Wave’s first years. In February 2004, it announced the construction of a full-fledged studio in north Provo. Construction commenced in July 2005, with the facilities beginning use by 2006.

Such growth, however, was tempered by commercial and artistic disasters like *Handcart*, *The Book of Mormon Movie*, and *The Home Teachers*. Others—primarily *Messengers of Truth* (2001), *Suddenly Unexpected* (2003), and *Day of Defense* (2003)—barely reached the screen at all, and several other titles never even reached production. As audiences and
investors grew weary of sub-Hollywood production values and Utah parochialisms, filmmakers began to sense that the honeymoon might be over.

**States of Disgrace**

The most obvious sign of a decline in Mormon cinema was Dutcher himself, who spent these years in what he wryly describes as a tremendous dry spell. His *The Prophet* proved to be the greatest Mormon film that was not to be. Dutcher championed his cause but felt that potential LDS investors turned a collective cold shoulder. He therefore followed his *God’s Army* model and began shooting the biopic without all the funding in place, but this time the miraculous financial intervention that had saved *God’s Army* did not materialize. Eventually he turned to a less expensive project in the form of a *God’s Army* sequel, *States of Grace*.

In the meantime, audiences had soured. LDS filmmakers had reacted against Hollywood’s stereotypes but only succeeded in creating their own, and some detractors pejoratively dismissed the entire Mormon film movement as “Mollywood.” If the Utah in-jokes had alienated Latter-day Saints both within the state and without, then the attempts at crossing over by watering down the Mormonism in films like *Pride and Prejudice* had failed to reach the mainstream market. Companies like HaleStorm still claimed a return on investment but the pool of investors had dried up, causing even them to begin aiming at mainstream productions. For
most of 2005 no LDS film was playing in theaters, making this the first such absence since 2002.

Returning to a metacinematic analysis, it is illuminating to compare the movement’s two most original films, the mockumentaries *The Work and the Story* (released in August 2003, while the wave was still gaining momentum) and *Sons of Provo* (released in February 2005, the last film before the fallow period). Both are comedies cast as satires of pop Mormon culture, but their manner and effectiveness are strikingly different. Nathan Smith Jones’s *The Work and the Story* posits the scenario that Richard Dutcher has disappeared, leaving a vacuum to be filled by the next great LDS filmmaker. It follows competing contenders, chronicling their egomania and how absurdly awful their productions turn out to be. Hindsight of how actual events followed fiction allows us to see it as not only biting satire but a chillingly accurate analysis of the shortcomings of Mormon culture. Contrast this with *Sons of Provo*, the directorial debut of HaleStorm star Will Swenson. This film tackles the semifictitious phenomenon of LDS boy bands in the mold of Jericho Road, particularly their mixing of the sacred and profane into one commercialized package—an ideal analogy for a supposedly religious cinema. Though it begins well, by the second half it becomes clear that the film has failed to

In *States of Grace* (2005), Dutcher sought to take the missionary film beyond even the new boundaries he had established with *God’s Army*. Hence, in the second scene of the movie Elder Farrell (Lucas Fleischer) scuffles with members of a street gang before being involved in a drive-by shooting. © Main Street Movie Co.
separate itself from the culture it is lampooning. In its climax of a maud-
lin acoustical song, *Sons of Provo* retains and even glorifies all the flaws
it apparently set out to criticize. It is therefore emblematic of most of the
Fifth Wave’s films, which also mistake sentimentality for spirituality and
quirkiness for entertainment.

Mormon cinema, then, had cried wolf too many times. By late 2005,
when more substantial films arrived—particularly Greg Whiteley’s docu-
mnetary *New York Doll* and Dutcher’s *States of Grace*—audiences pre-
dictably stayed away; the latter film’s original title *God’s Army 2* actually
proved a deterrent to potential viewers. Not only was audience interest
nonexistent, but the distributors themselves showed great ineptness in the
marketing and release of their films. HaleStorm was wise to release John
Moyer’s directorial debut *Mobsters and Mormons*, a pleasant comedy that
criticizes Mormon sanctimoniousness, on September 9, but this still only
recouped half its $350,000 cost in theaters. The second *Work and the Glory*
film, *American Zion*, was released by Vineyard on October 21 and, with
Sterling Van Wagenen having taken over direction from Russell Holt, it
was a darker and generally more intriguing film than its predecessor. It
was still doing reasonably well, therefore, when the two aforementioned
films—*States of Grace*, distributed by Main Street Movie Company, and
*New York Doll*, distributed in Utah by Excel—were both released, with vir-
tually no warning, on November 4. This head-to-head bungling between

Arthur “Killer” Kane explains how his bass guitar came to be known as Excalibur
in this moment from Greg Whiteley’s film *New York Doll* (2005). This is arguably
the first and only successful crossover film of the Fifth Wave to date. Courtesy
Greg Whiteley.
three of Mormon cinema’s four distributors—Vineyard, Main Street, and Excel—created a train wreck in which three of the finest LDS films in decades were left unseen, all losing out instead to Disney’s *Chicken Little* and the ensuing holiday films.

*New York Doll* is a tremendously engaging and profound film chronicling the last months of rock star–turned–Mormon Arthur “Killer” Kane. Its box office numbers grew slightly before fading—indicating positive word of mouth among both Mormons and rock fans—and those Latter-day Saints who did see it were generally thoroughly impressed.

*States of Grace*, however, erupted a torrent of controversy that only grew amid rumors about Dutcher’s planned secular productions of *Falling* and *Evil Angel*. *States of Grace* returns to the world of Los Angeles missionaries but this time includes them in a larger milieu of other faiths, races, and worldviews, resulting in a remarkable ensemble performance by the entire large cast. The film was more violent than any Mormon film to date, but it drew most of its criticism for its inclusion of a missionary’s off-screen fornication with a lonely actress who had once appeared in a pornographic film. Though this was central to the theme of Christ’s saving grace, many, particularly Dave Hunter at HaleStorm, attacked it as completely inappropriate.

Dutcher in turn was awakened to the changed state of Mormon cinema since *Brigham City* and realized that he could no longer hope for an egalitarian utopia of spiritual Mormon films; he had to differentiate his brand of Mormon film from his competitors’. What ensued was a barrage of mudslinging in print and online. Dutcher complained that the movement he started was spoiled by those who followed him,\textsuperscript{130} while others, upset with Dutcher’s cynical turn, claimed the father of Mormon cinema “might better be described as the deadbeat dad of an infant art form.”\textsuperscript{131}

After such attacks had simmered down, Dutcher calmly announced his disaffection, for personal reasons, from the LDS Church—and therefore Mormon cinema—in an editorial in Provo’s *Daily Herald* on April 12, 2007.\textsuperscript{132} Setting the stage for his farewell announcement, Dutcher sermonized for several paragraphs, challenging fellow filmmakers to save Mormon cinema by producing higher-quality films. A maelstrom of comments—some vicious, some sympathetic—erupted in print and throughout the Mormon online world, but this also subsided fairly quickly with olive branches and hopes that he might rejoin the faith someday. Hence Dutcher has returned to the completely secular and mainstream filmmaking where he began in 1994, expanding into genres such as horror with his upcoming film *Evil Angel*, and while he has not made public whether he still desires to complete his Joseph Smith film—a project that has, for his fans, taken
on the status of legend—he is ironically probably in a better position to do so now than while he was a practicing Latter-day Saint. Still, his departure is a great loss to Mormon cinema, since his trio of theatrical films has provided a strong aesthetic and spiritual foundation for Mormon cinema, even if audiences were not as prepared to embrace them as critics or Dutcher would have wished.

It was not just Dutcher who became disenchanted with the Mormon film market. By 2005 all the major figures who had created Mormon films were getting out as well. HaleStorm, for instance, created a new sister company named Stone Five Studios to make secular productions, though some asserted it was actually to distance these from the poor reputation that had gathered around the original name. So while Hunter and Dutcher had each accused the other of creating inappropriate content under the banner of “Mormon cinema,” when the smoke cleared both HaleStorm and Main Street Movie Co. were leaving for greener pastures. The fact remained that one could no longer make a living strictly by creating Mormon-themed features, and 2006 proved an even more fallow year than 2005.

What then remains of the theatrical feature film in the Fifth Wave? As noted at the beginning of this article, the current downturn probably represents a slump more than a death knell. The diaspora of filmmakers who glutted the market around 2004 leaves an open playing field for new talent. With Dutcher’s departure in particular, the situation is once again the same as in The Work and the Story, but this time the new contenders may come more deliberately, with better plans, more money, and more honed talent. It may yet prove true that Richard Dutcher is indeed the father of the Fifth Wave, but one whose closest progeny will not emerge for ten or fifteen years, causing him at that point to be described as ahead of his time. In the meanwhile, 2007 has already seen the theatrical release of Brian Brough’s modernization and Mormonization of Beauty and the Beast and Tyler Ford’s enjoyable British comedy Piccadilly Cowboy, about a (Mormon) love triangle between a Montana cowboy and two English sisters in London. And other films are already on the horizon, covering the gamut in terms of genre and style (Tears of a King is about Elvis Presley and the Mormons, for instance, while Passage to Zarahemla is a children’s adventure story with a Book of Mormon setting and Return with Honor is a postmission drama about a returning missionary who dies but is miraculously given sixty more days to finish his life). These films will generally be more carefully made and marketed, which will, in all respects, prove beneficial over the haphazard land rush of the recent past.

Failures and growing pains notwithstanding, the theatrically released feature film has finally arrived as a permanent and central component of
Mormon cinema. Dutcher initiated a new vitality that has conditioned the soil in which additional important films will flower—along with the inevitable weeds. The artistic achievements of these early Fifth Wave films are often brought into question, but their collective cultural achievement has been profound; independent Mormon feature films have breathed new life into Mormon storytelling generally and into the Mormon retail market in particular.

**The Fifth Wave Video Boom**

One of the most important but least discussed effects of *God’s Army* has been the increased stature of video releases, encompassing direct-to-video productions as well as films that first debuted in theaters or on television. The *God’s Army* phenomenon bolstered the video market not just for fiction films but especially for documentaries. Video releases obviously gained strength throughout the Fourth Wave, but Dutcher’s success and the coincidental rise of DVD as the dominant home video format combined to give new legitimacy to short films, videos, and nonfiction productions that would have otherwise been considered somewhat second-class. DVD sales surely had a great deal to do with Deseret Book’s acquisition of Excel, and in 2005 they began marketing many straight-to-video titles like the short documentary *American Mormon* and the secular feature *Down and Derby* much as they would any theatrical release.

Historical documentaries have often been the least innovative but most popular form of nonfiction film. Besides Lee Groberg’s steady work, worthy of mention are Matt Whitaker’s *Truth & Conviction: The Helmut Hübener Story* (2002), Scott Tiffany’s *Forgotten Voyage: The Mormon Sea Trek That Sparked the Gold Rush* (2002), Peter Johnson’s *Journey of Faith* (2005) on the Book of Mormon, and a series of unpolished but highly informative documentaries by Dennis Lyman on nineteenth-century temples.

Verité films and other works based in the present have been equally prolific and often more innovative. *New York Doll*, a theatrical release, probably tops this list in terms of style and spirituality, but many other films are not far behind. Tasha Oldham’s *The Smith Family: A Lesson in Love* (2002), about a Salt Lake City family dealing with homosexuality and AIDS, gained the coveted opening position in PBS’s prestigious documentary series *POV*. Steven Greenstreet’s *This Divided State* (2005), which deals with Michael Moore’s controversial appearance at Utah Valley State College during the 2004 presidential campaign, was tremendously successful at festivals, universities, and on video. Other notable productions include Brad Barber’s *Troy through a Window* (2002), Melissa Puente’s *Sisterz in Zion* (2006), and particularly a series of films known as the Fit for the Kingdom
movement. Spearheaded by BYU film professor Dean Duncan, these short works are deceptively simple profiles of rank-and-file Latter-day Saints. On a lighter note, one overlooked gem was KJZZ-TV’s short-lived reality television series Not on the First Date, a Utah Valley version of the popular Blind Date series that both respected and occasionally lampooned the conservative yet tacitly libidinous courtship practices of Mormon culture.

As Mormon culture grows increasingly prominent and robust, it will be increasingly examined through nonfiction films. As Helen Whitney did with The Mormons, Mormon documentarians like Tasha Oldham and Melissa Puente (significantly, they are often women) will increasingly be able to examine their culture without appearing to challenge their faith. Sisterz in Zion undertook such an examination in terms of race and economic status, and an even more important film in this regard might be the upcoming Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons, produced by Darius Gray and Margaret Blair Young. Documentaries on modern polygamy are increasing, as are films on politics (with two planned on Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign) and other aspects of Latter-day Saints’ lives. But as with New York Doll and the hour-long Fit for the Kingdom film Angie (2006), the best upcoming Mormon documentaries might very well be those that paint the most intimate portraits of Mormonism’s adherents.

Fiction work released on video has featured many duds but frequent jewels like Christian Vuissa’s half-hour Roots and Wings (2002), about a Mexican family in America torn apart by the wife’s and daughter’s conversion to Mormonism. John Lyde has been a particularly productive video maker; his work has ranged from abysmal to quite good; the missionary film The Field Is White (2002) is rough but sincere while the secular romantic comedy Take a Chance (2006) is technically accomplished but narratively flat and clichéd. Directing on video and editing some HaleStorm features allowed him to cut his teeth to the point where his theatrical debut will be the forthcoming Singles 2nd Ward in 2007.

Perhaps the most overlooked arena of Mormon videos is in children’s media. The post–God’s Army video boom, combined with the popularity of Christian videos like Big Idea’s VeggieTales pictures, has created a vivacious LDS children’s film market. Foremost among these pictures are LightStone Studios’ Liken the Scriptures live-action musicals, the animated series Junior’s Giants and Max’s Attic (by Excel and Covenant, respectively), HaleStorm’s moral barnyard series Howdy Town, the interactive series FHE on DVD, and even Mormon videos for the very young—in the Baby Einstein mold—in the competing My Little Saints and Baby Mormon series.
Mormons and the Mainstream Industry

The Allure of Crossing Over

It is still too early in the Fifth Wave to tell which new LDS filmmakers will succeed in the mainstream industry. The most logical bet, however, is on director Jared Hess and those associated with his debut film *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004). Based on the short BYU student film *Peluca* from 2002, this picture depicts the antics of a high school student in Preston, Idaho, and often feels more like extended sketch comedy than an actual feature. Fox Searchlight picked it up at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, and in general release the film quickly became a national, then international, phenomenon, vaulting its star Jon Heder to celebrity status. The film, which cost $400,000, eventually grossed $44.5 million, besides immense revenue from international sales, DVDs, and subsidiary tie-in products.

If *Napoleon* became a touchstone in mainstream American culture, then it proved an especially poignant entity within American Mormonism.
Some Utahns and Idahoans began ruminating on how closely their lives came into contact with the filmmakers’, and more importantly most Church members lauded the film as an example of Mormonism made palatable for mainstream society. A good deal of this sentiment was fueled by a desire for acceptance and celebrity, but it also put pressure on Mormon filmmakers to steer away from the God’s Army model and return to secular productions. In the past, such a move would not have been referred to as crossing over, but in the new post–God’s Army atmosphere, it often has been, particularly as filmmakers who had previously made Mormon-themed material—such as Andrew Black, Ryan Little, or Ben Gourley—went on to create works with no apparent Mormon content.

Prospects for Mormon Cinema

Though some LDS filmmakers, including Richard Dutcher, have turned away from attempting Mormon-themed feature films, this does not sound the death knell for Mormon cinema. The theatrical feature film has been the most visible component of emerging Mormon cinema since 2000, but it is hardly the only one. During the current retrenchment, it
may be easy to deride or dismiss Mormon cinema, but many factors suggest an imminent rebound: the Mormon retail market and DVD sales within it flourish; more and more Latter-day Saints are in the entertainment industry and constitute a corps of artists and technical personnel; film and media production is thriving at Brigham Young University and other Mormon venues; the Church continues to use and implicitly endorse the medium; the LDS Film Festival is growing; Church membership numbers are expanding, especially globally, where Latter-day Saints are hungry for any media about their faith (as evidenced by the first Festival du Film Mormon, held in Brussels during February 2007, followed by a touring program in Francophone cities throughout the year); and Mormon film criticism is now starting to provide serious discussion that should inspire and help refine Mormon filmmaking. And despite the superficiality of Mormonism apparent in some movies, there is a growing and healthy complexity with which LDS characters and themes are treated in Church productions, mainstream movies, and independent Mormon films. Mormon cinema will continue to emerge due to all of these conditions and to a robust, if young, Mormon film culture. Mormon cinema will be able to withstand its own stumbles and move forward, just as Mormon literature has done before it.

Where the Fifth Wave will lead from here is hard to predict, but we can be certain that vying with the Mormon-themed theatrical feature film will be the new forms and uses of film made possible by evolving media and digital culture. Throughout the history of Mormon cinema, societal, artistic, and particularly technological developments in mainstream cinema have presaged similar events within Mormonism. The 16mm film and consumer-level video were each essential to create the Third and Fourth Waves, respectively, and it is likely that the single greatest influence on present and future waves will be the rapidly developing technology of digital video.

This transition has already begun with heavy use of acquisition formats like Mini-DV, Digital Betacam, and high-definition video, and of distribution methods such as DVD and the Internet. Global developments in digital film distribution in 2005 and 2006—including VOD (video on demand), TiVo, the shrinking window between theatrical and DVD release, beaming digital signals to movie theaters, mergers between entertainment and Internet firms, and websites like YouTube.com and MySpace.com—indicate the course that Mormon cinema will surely follow. In the next few years media will become increasingly liquid and democratized, both characteristics that stand to benefit the Latter-day Saint community.
This revolution in consumer control of audiovisual media is set to coincide with the Church’s spread outside the United States and across the globe, where Mormon filmmakers, though underrepresented, have already begun to make their presence known. But this revolution does not herald an era of multinational professional filmmakers as much as it does conditions in which the general Church membership will be able to take the camera into their hands to communicate with one another. The expanding Internet will create a cinematic worldwide web providing Latter-day Saints the ability to identify more broadly, personally, and deeply with their counterparts across the globe.

We can look for films, like those already noted from the Clawsons’ work forward, about regular people and quotidian activities involved in building up the Church: building a new chapel in Bangalore, preparing the sacrament in Campinas, sending the first missionaries to Beirut, or running a family history center in Parowan. The logical extension of Judge Whitaker’s Church in Action series, such a massive activity could be undertaken only by the interested individuals themselves. But where Whitaker’s films were woefully underdistributed, these productions would be instantly accessible to Church members anywhere with a computer and Internet connection. This development would be the visual equivalent of President Kimball’s portable transistor radios with the important addition that the viewer can instantly respond with his or her own visual message, creating a dialogue that fosters global fellowship and the spiritual gathering of a geographically dispersed people.

The path forward is already under construction. The prototype for films like those described above can be found in the Fit for the Kingdom documentaries mentioned earlier, online at http://fitforthekingdom.byu.edu. The Church’s website, www.lds.org, has many streamed videos of general conference addresses and other material, and Kent Olmstead’s independent website, http://mormonwebtv.com, has, as of this writing, posted well over one hundred short streaming videos, including interviews, video blogging, trailers, home videos, and more polished short films. Though small at present, the potential for such a site is enough to revolutionize Mormon cinema and how geographically distant Latter-day Saints might relate to and fellowship with each other.

Just as importantly, BYU Broadcasting Services under John Reim launched BYUTV in January 2000 on the Dish Network and, in March 2007, BYU Television International, expanding the station’s reach into Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking areas. BYUTV has also been picked up on numerous satellite, cable, and Internet avenues. In early 2006, it was estimated that BYUTV was available on cable television packages in
40 million homes in the United States (constituting 100 million potential viewers), but more interesting are its statistics concerning international growth. It is estimated, for instance, that it will be available in 15 million homes in Brazil by 2010, and already online downloads of streaming video in China triple those in the U.S.134

Despite the increased demand for content created by a second station besides KBYU, Reim and his successors have not yet been given an additional production budget; hence, much of what airs on BYUTV consists of stale lectures, roundtable discussions, and even old football games. The content gap is not a crisis but does indicate how BYU Broadcasting and its entities remain one of the greatest untapped resources for the global dissemination of Mormon cinema. Many hope to see more independently produced films funded and aired on BYUTV, taking their place alongside their in-house counterparts. A production budget to allow such films to go forward would provide vital opportunities for new and developing LDS filmmakers.

Fiction films and, as mentioned, theatrically released features will continue to be a major component of Mormon cinema, and digitization will help them as much as their documentary counterparts. Another great need, therefore, is for a new cadre of filmmakers to come to the fore and create intelligent pictures that do more than poke fun at the exaggerated quirks of Utah culture. Equally important is the realization that potential investors in Mormon films must be willing to provide the resources that will allow this to happen.

Finally, the last great factor presaging a future flowering in Mormon cinema has to be the improvement and proliferation of film criticism. Such criticism will make possible films worthy of the hundreds of thousands of dollars they will cost to produce. Returning to President Kimball’s statement cited at this article’s beginning, if LDS “motion picture specialists” are to create masterpieces that will, perhaps digitally, “cover every part of the globe in the tongues of the people,” then, as Kimball recognized, they must be “written by great artists [and] purified by the best critics.”135

At present, thoughtful and incisive criticism of Mormon films is appearing, but it is eclipsed by armchair film reviews and informal audience responses. Mormon cineastes may once again draw their example from the Mormon literati: Wayne Booth once said, concerning Mormon literature, that “we won’t get a great artistic culture until we have a great critical culture,”136 and this has proven true as literary critics such as Richard Cracroft, Eugene England, and others have articulated Mormon theoretical frameworks and applied these fruitfully to Mormon creative writing.137 The need for good criticism is much greater in the exponentially more
popular and populist field of cinema: educating audiences and filmmakers alike, honestly criticizing where efforts fall short, and praising Mormon filmmakers when praise is due—including reinserting film credits in institutional films as was the case in Judge Whitaker’s period—will all lead to an improved Mormon cinematic culture producing improved films.

This history has attempted to lay the ground for such films and such criticism to flourish. Through the decades, we have seen trends grow concerning the democratization of cinema, the improvement and growth of fiction films, attempts at Mormon film criticism, the spread of original distribution methods, and other components of a robust cinematic culture. A knowledge of their history may now allow for even more conscientious and thus innovative growth in the future. No one may know the destiny of Mormon cinema, but we can certainly learn from its past.

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1. Anonymous (probably Richard or Gwen Dutcher), www.zionfilms.com, ellipses in original. For the source text see Spencer W. Kimball, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts,” Ensign 7 (July 1977): 5; this well-known version is actually the condensed version of an earlier speech entitled “Education for Eternity” given to BYU faculty and staff on September 12, 1967, printed in BYU Speeches of the Year, 1967–68 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1968), 12–19. Thus, the website’s author, like many others, mistakenly identifies the speech as originating in 1977, when Spencer W. Kimball was President of the Church.


3. For two examples see Chauntelle Plewe, “LDS Filmmakers Sacrifice Everything for Their Movies,” Daily Universe, August 22, 2003, 1, which calls Dutcher “the creator of the first LDS film ’God’s Army’”; and Preston Hunter, “What Is LDS Cinema?” written April 30, 2001, amended February 2005, www.ldsfilm.com/lds_cinema.html, in which he claims that though Dutcher was not the first LDS filmmaker or the first filmmaker to include Latter-day Saints in his work, he “was the first to do both—the first Latter-day Saint to make a feature film—a film that played nationally in commercial theaters—about Latter-day Saints.” Italics in original.

4. By comparison, only roughly forty-five thousand attendees arrived for the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. This festival is considered one of the most prestigious film events in North America.


6. In 1977 President Spencer W. Kimball’s “patriarchal blessing” for the arts was published, officially endorsing Mormon film (see note 1); in 1953 the BYU Motion Picture Department was formed (see page 73); in 1940 Twentieth Century Fox’s blockbuster Brigham Young debuted; and back in 1913 the first Church-sponsored feature film was created (see pages 35–37). Each of these events precipitated similar responses regarding the arrival of Mormon movies.

7. The film was so expansive that at least one modern critic has dubbed it the sixth feature-length film in American history. Patrick Robertson, Film Facts (New York: Billboard Books, 2001), 9–14, 211. “Feature film” grew as a relative term. In 1903, The Great Train Robbery was considered a feature at eleven minutes (one reel). For his list, Robertson used the Cinémathèque Française definition, “a commercially made film over one hour duration,” and included only those films that were shown in their entirety. Before the first film on his list, Oliver Twist (May
1912), at least two other feature-length films were produced in the United States but were released in several one-reel parts. Robertson also identifies One Hundred Years of Mormonism as one of the first three documentaries produced anywhere in the world, a curious claim since the film does not resemble a documentary in any way.

8. Journal History of the Church, September 2, 1928, 4, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives), also available on volume 2 of Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, CD-ROM, 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002). The Journal History of the Church is also available on microfilm in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

10. http://mormonlit.lib.byu.edu. The database’s film listings are also divided into these categories.
11. Summaries of each wave and key films from each of them are listed at http://mormonlit.byu.edu/html/Five_Waves_of_Mormon_Film.html, with films linked to their complete entries in the Mormon Literature Database.
Kent Jacobs, “The History of Motion Pictures Produced by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1967), 17.


25. Donald G. Godfrey, Philo T. Farnsworth: The Father of Television (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001), 181, see also 11–12 (on his revelation on the farm), 28–31 (on his initial work in San Francisco), and 180–84 (for evaluations of his faith and for Pem’s contribution).


32. Austin, “Troped by the Mormons,” 63; Cornwall and Arrington, “Perpetuation of a Myth,” 147–65.
42. Journal History of the Church, April 17, 1913, 5; see also Nelson, “Latter-day Saint Screen Portrayals,” 78.


55. *Latter-day Saint Leaders: Past and Present* (1948) is a Frank Wise compilation of some crumbling Clawson brothers films that were discovered in a basement during the late 1940s. These short films show many General Authorities, including the 1910 First Presidency (Joseph F. Smith, Anton H. Lund, and John Henry Smith). The compilation includes other footage shot at the time of the April 1916 general conference and some film from the 1920s. A narration gives biographical information.


57. Patrick Ford, interview by James D’Arc, April 25, 1979, typescript, 6, 14, Perry Special Collections.


60. Biographies of many Mormons involved with movies can be found in the Mormon Literature and Creative Arts database (http://MormonLit.lib.byu.edu) and at LDSfilm.com.


64. I am indebted to Ardis Parshall for a great deal of information on Corianton, including its release and demise. Her work will be presented in a forthcoming article. Nelson, “Latter-day Saint Screen Portrayals,” 187–90; Nelson, “History of Utah Film,” 31–33.

65. Joseph Smith Peery, interview by Clinton D. Christensen, Salt Lake City, December 2001, Church Archives.


78. There is some confusion about this film, as the Church Archives in Salt Lake contain a film reportedly shot by Mark Brimhall Garff and entitled *General Authorities at Christmastime*. It is unclear if these are the same film or what type of collaboration Wise and Garff might have had.


81. Wetzel O. Whitaker, interview by Thomas Cheney, July 30, 1985, typescript, 5, Perry Special Collections.


102. Jesse E. Stay, interview by Kimberly S. James, Provo, Utah, 1979, transcript, 4–9, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church Archives.

103. Stay, interview by James, 13.


105. Johnson, email to Terry.


115. At a panel entitled “Dissenting Opinions: Art from the Dark Side of Happy Valley,” presented August 11, 2006, at the Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, Neil LaBute stated he was disfellowshipped from the Church shortly after “Church elders” became aware of bash. He then referred to ultimately "resigning my membership from the Church about a year ago, . . . finding that, certainly for my children, . . . it was better to have a father who wasn’t a Mormon than who was what they essentially saw as a bad Mormon.” Panel discussion available for download at www.sunstoneonline.com/symposium/symp-mp3s.asp.


121. For further information, see John Williams, “Hitchcock and Mormonism,” presentation at the 2006 Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City (August 2006), available online at www.sunstoneonline.org.
122. Austin, “Troped by the Mormons,” 55.


126. This final point is from Mary Rindlesbach, “Mormon Cinema,” 6–7, unpublished paper for Film Studies 506: Historiography of Film and TV, Emory University, April 26, 2005.


Mormon missionary Isoldi Keene (Louis Willoughby) demonstrates his hypnotic power to the audience in the opening frames of *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922). The intertitle reads, “Isoldi Keene . . . Latter-day Saint . . . and by means of his mesmeric powers, one of the cleverest recruiters in the Mormon ranks.” Frame enlargement. Collection of James D’Arc.
The year 2005 was arguably the centennial of the portrayal of Mormons in the movies, basing the event on Thomas Edison’s *A Trip to Salt Lake City* (1905), the earliest extant nickelodeon short subject dealing with Mormons.¹ This auspicious anniversary was marked at an art house theater in New York City by a week of screenings—dubbed “Mormonsploitation”—of early Mormon-themed motion pictures, including the 1922 British film *Trapped by the Mormons* and its 2005 shot-for-shot silent black-and-white remake that served, according to *The Village Voice*, as “the anchor of the series.”² The remake, directed by ex-Mormon Ian Allen, stars “drag king” Johnny Kat as Mormon missionary Isoldi Keene, equipped, according to the *Washington Post*, with “hypnotic powers” with which he “lures young women [one young Nora Prescott in particular] away from their families so they can be sent to Utah, where terrible fates—including polygamy—await them.”³ A Salt Lake City film critic described Keene’s wives as “vampire brides” engaged in a “blood-drenched” battle with Nora’s rescuers that gives the film a more potent, sexually oriented twenty-first-century tone.⁴ Allen’s obvious connection of Keene’s powers to vampirism invites background research into the original *Trapped by the Mormons* and the sensational novel on which the film’s scenario was based.

The undead, the living dead, Nosferatu, Walpurgis Night. These and other terms now a familiar part of vampire lore have appeared in the mythology of various parts of the world for at least three thousand years. However, they were first brought together in modern times with the 1897 publication of *Dracula*.⁵ Abraham (Bram) Stoker brought to the changing turn-of-the-century world (especially Great Britain) a drama of superstition, vampires, spells, and potions from the old world and placed them in a
The Legacy of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*

*Dracula* has never been out of print since its initial publication in 1897 in Britain and in 1899 in the United States. Stoker presented a dramatic reading of his novel at the Lyceum Theatre in an effort to protect his copyright.¹ An unauthorized film version of *Dracula*, entitled *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* was made by renowned German filmmaker F. W. Murnau in 1922. Stoker’s widow sued Murnau and won, demanding that all prints and the original negative be destroyed as ordered by the court.² However, a print did survive and the film is considered a masterpiece. A subsequent authorized dramatization of *Dracula* by Hamilton Deane and John Balderston had successful theatrical engagements beginning in 1924 in Britain and 1927 in the United States, where it played to packed Broadway houses for a year and went on tour for another two years.³ The

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3. Donald F. Glut, *The Dracula Book* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 77–99, provides a useful survey of the many stage renditions of Dracula. Montague Summers, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929), 335–37, offers a contemporary account of the response to the Hamilton Deane and John Balderston stage adaptation of *Dracula*. Skal, *Hollywood Gothic*, 139–205, details the most comprehensive production history of *Dracula* to date. The films that most directly derived from *Dracula* are *Nosferatu* (Prana, 1922), directed by F. W. Murnau with Max Schreck as Graf Orlok, the vampire; *Dracula* (Universal, 1931), directed by Tod Browning with Bela Lugosi in the title role; *Vampyr* (1932), directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer; *Horror of Dracula* (Hammer, 1958), directed by Terence Fisher with Christopher Lee as the Count; *Dracula* (Universal, 1979), directed by John Badham with Frank Langella in the title role; *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (Werner Herzog / 20th Century Fox, 1979)
title role was played by a young Hungarian actor named Bela Lugosi. Lugosi was picked by Universal Pictures to play the role once again in the 1931 film version of the Deane-Balderston stage play. The film was Universal’s biggest moneymaker of the year and spawned a string of horror films produced by Universal and other studios, which continued for three decades thereafter. These include Dracula’s Daughter (Universal, 1936), The Return of the Vampire (Columbia, 1944), and House of Frankenstein (Universal, 1945), in which Dracula is an important figure. The role of “Dracula” was reprised in a send-up fashion by Lugosi in the very popular comedy Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (Universal, 1948).

Owing to the great number of stories, novels, plays, and motion pictures, the name Dracula became a household word and has since inspired a spate of horror films in which Dracula and the lore of vampirism are prominently featured, a presweetened breakfast cereal, and even a friendly, harmless character on the long-running PBS children’s television show Sesame Street, who teaches youngsters to . . . what else but to count? with Klaus Kinski as Dracula; and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (Columbia, 1992), directed by Francis Ford Coppola with Gary Oldman as Dracula.


5. An exhaustive survey of motion pictures, radio programs, comic books, phonograph recordings, play revivals, fan clubs, and scholarly associations derived from Stoker’s Dracula up to the mid-1970s is found in Glut, Dracula Book, 155–360.
modern-day setting. This essay will demonstrate that the extremely popular images created by the book found their way into aspects of England’s anti-Mormon crusades and into a book, *The Love Story of a Mormon*, written in 1911 by one of the movement’s most prolific literary crusaders, Winifred Graham. Such images were also successfully translated into a motion picture version of her novel, produced in England and released in 1922 with the title *Trapped by the Mormons.*

Fifty years old when he published his atmospheric tale of a vampire preying on unsuspecting victims in London, Stoker had spent much of his life as the personal assistant of the great English actor Sir Henry Irving at Irving’s Lyceum Theatre in London. Through his activities connected with the world of theater and travel, Stoker learned of, and became fascinated by, the age-old tales of vampires that originated in what is now Romania. Unknown to Stoker until after he was well into writing his novel, many of those legends were mixed with the real-life exploits of Vlad Tepes, the historical Dracula, who was in reality a fifteenth-century Romanian nobleman and general who, in order to discourage further invasions by the Turks, impaled his conquered enemies on wooden stakes. One account numbers his victims at twenty thousand. Vlad’s father garnered the sobriquet “Dracul” from a Catholic paramilitary organization to which he belonged. In Romanian, *Dracul* means “devil,” and *a* at the end signifies “son of.” Dracula was, by most accounts, aptly named. Combining this historical figure with folktales from the Transylvania region, Stoker named his king of the vampires Count Dracula.

The cultural climate during the closing decade of the nineteenth century in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe was filled with popular references to vampires. The first stage melodrama, *Le Vampire*, by Charles Nodier, Achille Jouffroy, and Pierre Carmouche, had been presented in Paris in 1820 and imitations soon followed. James Malcolm Rymer’s mass-marketed novel *Varney the Vampire: or, The Feast of Blood* (1847) coincided with the birth year of Bram Stoker. In 1897, Phillip Burne-Jones’s painting *The Vampyre* was displayed to acclaim at the New Gallery in London, perhaps because his cousin, Rudyard Kipling, wrote a poem of the same name for the exhibit catalog about “a rag and a bone and a hank of hair.” A successful play, *A Fool There Was*, which takes its title from the first line of Kipling’s poem, written by Porter Emerson Browne in 1906, later became a novel as well. In the painting, the poem, the play, and the novel, references to a woman as a vampire were explicit. The 1915 film *A Fool There Was* established Theda Bara as a major movie star and assured the success of the new Fox Film Corporation, now Twentieth Century Fox.
Theda Bara, from then on known as “The Vamp,” inspired an additional entry of the word—as both a noun and a verb—in Webster’s Dictionary. Stoker, however, was not content to rehash old legends that had been available for centuries. Rather, he wrote a modern tale of horror that begins with Jonathan Harker, an agent for a London real estate firm, on his way to Dracula’s castle in Transylvania to discuss a piece of property Harker’s firm had purchased for the Count in London. In Transylvania, Harker is warned against the evil Count by the local peasants but nevertheless proceeds on his journey. At the castle, Harker is attacked by Dracula’s wives, and the Count crafts a plan whereby coffins full of his native earth are transported from Romania to the ruins of Carfax Abbey near London, from where he will lure England’s young virginal females into the ranks of the undead. In England, the Count is challenged by Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, a Dutch physician wise in the vampire’s ways. Van Helsing, Harker, and Harker’s fiancée, Mina, who was herself bitten by the Count, discover the vampire’s hiding places of earth and chase Dracula to Transylvania where, in the novel’s climax, Harker severs Dracula’s head from his body, thus freeing himself and his betrothed from the curse of the undead.

Winifred Graham and *The Love Story of a Mormon*

Within fifteen years of the publication of Stoker’s book, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, active in Great Britain since 1837, experienced what Malcolm R. Thorp identifies as four anti-Mormon campaigns between 1911 and 1926 that met with varying degrees of success. The cultural image of a sinister, predatory vampire penetrated many of the cultural expressions connected with that crusade.

A key figure in all of these anti-Mormon campaigns was British authoress and anti-Mormon crusader Winifred Graham, also known as Mrs. Theodore Cory. Graham, who claimed to be the most published authoress in England with eighty-eight books, wrote six anti-Mormon suspense novels and a highly critical history of the Church. In 1924, Elder David O. McKay, president of the Church’s European Mission, expressed little use for Graham’s activities when he wrote to President Heber J. Grant, “The activity of the Saints in Britain in tracting is arousing the devil, who is manifesting his evil designs through his co-partner Winifred and her ilk.”

*The Love Story of a Mormon* was published in 1911, at the height of an anti-Mormon movement that began in Liverpool. Capitalizing on a campaign marked by rallies, speeches, and newspaper stories against
English girls being seduced and taken to Utah by lustful Mormon missionaries, Graham’s novel was set in Liverpool (called “Riverpool” in the book).

A young working-class girl, Jacinth Abbott, is approached by a Mormon missionary, Ziba Wayne, a “wonderful vision of all-conquering manhood.” She is instantly “magnetized by a pair of large brown eyes, set in a singularly attractive countenance.” Wayne gives her some tracts and Jacinth returns home to her parents, who become suspicious of their daughter’s desire to break off her engagement to an up-and-coming businessman in the area. Meanwhile, at Wayn’s encouraging, Jacinth convinces her girlfriends to listen to the elder’s strange new religion and tales of spiritual wifery in Utah. The missionary extends a hand of welcome to each separately, “the mesmeric hand which knew its own power.” They are all treated to a bogus demonstration of raising the dead when Wayne revives a young girl in a passing caravan of gypsies. Meanwhile, Jacinth’s parents find the Mormon pamphlets in their daughter’s room and, having listened to speeches against Mormonism and read the exposé articles in the newspapers, they conclude that the Mormons have designs on their young daughter.

Jacinth’s jilted fiancé hires a detective to monitor Jacinth’s mysterious behavior and travels since, he declares, “[the Mormon’s] chief prey appears to be women and girls.” Sensing danger, Elder Wayne devises a method to get Jacinth away from her suspicious parents. His sister, he tells Jacinth, will pose as an authoress offering her a job as a traveling companion to Germany. The ploy is successful for a time, but Jacinth’s fiancé eventually tracks the pair to Wayne’s lodgings in London. There Jacinth is prepared for baptism until Wayne’s “sister” reveals that she is not his sister at all, but his first wife. Jacinth confronts Wayne with her newfound information, and he condemns both Jacinth and his jealous first wife to death. Jacinth must now plan an escape. Fortunately a detective, who posed as a waiter at the restaurant where Jacinth and Wayne had dined the previous night, had given her a scarf to use as a sign of distress. She hangs it from her window, where it is visible to her fiancé and the detective lodged across the street. When Wayne and a confederate return from meetings that evening, expecting to find the condemned women dead from gas inhalation, the detective and Jacinth’s fiancé, together with a cadre of London bobbies, arrest the missionaries and quickly take them to jail. There Ziba Wayne commits suicide, and Jacinth and her reunited fiancé are happily wed in an orthodox Christian ceremony.

The preface to The Love Story of a Mormon was written by Graham’s friend Bishop J. E. C. Welldon, dean of Manchester. Welldon wrote
passionately that the reader should not interpret the book as a work of pure fiction:

It is a novel with a purpose; but as being such it is all the more valuable, for it copes with a definite evil. Like Miss Graham I have been for some time past concerned with the Mormon propaganda in England. I have learnt something of its secrecy, its assiduity, and its success; I know how important it is to warn young emotional religious girls, living perhaps in more or less unhappy homes, against its seductiveness. But a novel is often a better mentor than a sermon or a speech, if only because it appeals to a larger circle of people.

The Mormonism which Miss Graham opposes is the Mormonism of the Salt Lake City. There polygamy has long flourished, and there it still exists. It is in fact the distinctive feature of Mormonism in Utah; for apart from polygamy that Mormonism is dull and unintelligible. Girls who emigrate from England to Utah find themselves members of an immorally constituted society.

There is no great need, I think, to invoke the arm of the law in England against Mormonism. If the light is once let in upon it, it will die of itself. The moral sense of English men and women will rise against it. It is my earnest hope that Miss Graham’s literary skill may prove efficacious in the crusade in which she has played so notable and so noble a part.16

In November 1919, Graham was invited to speak at the World Christian Citizenship Conference in Pittsburgh. Her keynote address at the World Conference on Mormonism session was so powerful that Elder James E. Talmage was booed from the rostrum when he attempted to reply to Graham’s impassioned speech. That same year, Great Britain denied the visas of all Latter-day Saint missionaries bound for England until Senator Reed Smoot was successful in persuading authorities to reissue them nearly one year later.17 Graham’s strident anti-Mormonism in 1917 sought a parallel to England’s struggle against Germany when she described Utah as “really a kind of Kaiser rule, and the Hohenzollern bully might well

Winifred Graham. Graham was a prominent anti-Mormon crusader in the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century. She wrote The Love Story of a Mormon in 1911; the tale was made into Trapped by the Mormons in 1922. Photo from Graham’s book That Reminds Me (New York: Skefington, 1945).
stand as a replica of the Mormon Church power, working its evil for personal gain, and using God’s name as a weapon and boast.”

Trapped by the Mormons

Church officials became highly sensitized to the power of popular film as a result of the 1911–12 release of A Victim of the Mormons, from the renowned Nordisk company, and the play Through Death Valley, or The Mormon Peril, both dealing with well-worn plots involving polygamy and sinister Mormons. The Master Film Company’s release of Trapped by the Mormons in 1922 coincided with the next major anti-Mormon crusade in England. Even as late as 1928, when it was reissued under the title The Mormon Peril, the film was publicized by lurid copy, warning “Girls Beware!” On its reissue, contemporary sources report that “its scenes are accompanied during projection by the running commentary of a lecturer.”

Trapped by the Mormons closely follows the narrative of Graham’s novel, but what I wish to emphasize are the similarities between the visual images portrayed in the film and the verbal descriptions painted by Graham in her novel. The film begins by showing a wide-eyed Mormon
missionary, here named Isoldi Keene, not Ziba Wayne as in Graham’s novel. The camera’s iris narrows to Keene’s main attraction, his transfixing eyes. Lest the viewer miss so obvious a visual clue, the intertitles inform us that this man is indeed one whose “mesmeric powers” allow him to be “one of the cleverest recruiters in the Mormon ranks.” Later in the film, Keene encounters a gypsy caravan and in full view of the girlfriends whom Nora Prescott (in the book named Jacinth Abbott) has gathered together, he performs the miracle of raising a woman from the dead. Suitably impressed, the girls depart with Keene’s admonition not to tell anyone of the so-called miracle. Keene’s charlatanesque performance is capped by the payoff of the woman whom he “raised from the dead” and her male accomplice. Keene congratulates the participants by saying that their “acting was superb!” The woman then states that she did not think that Keene would ever release her from his trance. While the act was contrived for Keene’s own purposes, the film makes clear that Keene’s mesmeric powers are real. The remainder of the seventy minutes of screen time follows the book faithfully, with the exception of Wayne’s suicide. In the film, Keene is simply hauled off to jail, leaving the reunited young lovers to embrace as the film fades out to the end.

A scene from *Trapped by the Mormons*. Missionary Isoldi Keene stages a raising of the dead to impress potential converts. *Right to left*: Isoldi Keene (Louis Willoughby), his missionary companion Elder Kayler (Ward McCallister), and an unidentified accomplice. Frame enlargement. Collection of James D’Arc.
Critically, *Trapped by the Mormons* was viewed according to the “standard set by present-day films” as “lamentably lacking in most of the essentials.” Even on its re-release in 1928, it was considered by a leading trade paper as “nothing more nor less than a propaganda picture, crudely produced.” The reaction of the LDS Church to the 2005 remake was one of little concern. “With something like this, it is over the top and we don’t take it seriously,” Church spokeswoman Kim Farah said. “Nobody can possibly take this seriously.” In 1922, however, it was a different story to then missionary and later Church President Ezra Taft Benson. His journal records his eviction from his lodgings in England due to the hostile atmosphere created by Graham’s books and the film. When *Married to a Mormon*—the sequel to *Trapped by the Mormons*—was released later the same year, the pluckiness of Mormon missionaries was evident in their proactive response. President of the Hull Conference G. Osmond Hyde seemed to see a bright spot amid what he called a “bad-rank” film:

> We secured permission from the police and the manager of the hall to tract the people as they left the show. . . . We distributed a large number of pamphlets and tracts. Of course some of the people would not accept them, others tore them up in our faces, but others were anxious
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to get them and would not leave until they had secured one. That was the best stroke of advertising that we have put forth since coming over here. In three evenings we let more people know that we are here than we could have done in three months at ordinary tracting from door to door. It was a rare experience but one in which, I am sure, we did a great amount of good.  

While baptisms did decrease during the height of the anti-Mormon crusades, the 1924 campaign was, according to Malcolm Thorp, unsuccessful “largely because the public image of the Mormons was undergoing change. . . . The Church was seen as being transformed into just another of the multitudinous sects in America.”  

To be sure, when Trapped by the Mormons entered distribution in Canada in late 1924, Church officials took measures to prohibit its showing in the United States. Canadian Mission president Joseph Quinney wrote to Apostle and Utah Senator Reed Smoot about Quinney’s failed negotiation with Canadian censors to have the film edited before general release. Smoot had been in correspondence with President Heber J. Grant about contacting the film’s distributor in order to discourage distribution of Trapped by the Mormons in the United States. Only a few years earlier, Smoot was successful in having two feature films based on Zane Grey novels, Riders of the Purple Sage and The Rainbow Trail, taken out of European distribution by the Fox Film Corporation.  

There is no known documentation of how Senator Smoot negotiated with the distributor, but there is no indication that Trapped by the Mormons was shown anywhere in the United States.

The whereabouts of Winifred Graham’s papers are, at this writing, unknown. Similarly, the records of Master Film Company have not become available for research use. However, in the absence of such historical documentation, the similarities shared by Graham’s book and Trapped by the Mormons to the vampire imagery of Bram Stoker’s Dracula require serious attention. In this article, filmic similarities to Graham’s and Stoker’s descriptions will be limited to references to the already cited Dracula, directed by Tod Browning and featuring Bela Lugosi in the title role. The similarities imply an attempt by one author, and later by two filmmakers, to capitalize on recurring images of the vampire in popular culture at that time. A few of the many related images to be examined in this article are those that I will identify as stranger from a strange land, mesmeric powers, and the kiss of death.

**Stranger from a Strange Land.** In both Dracula and Trapped by the Mormons, the mystique of the Romanian Count, the Mormon missionary, and their areas of origin have much to do with how they were perceived
by those around them. In writing Dracula, Stoker knew that Transylvania was a veritable mystery land to most Britons. George Bernard Shaw’s play Pygmalion, written in 1912, refers to the “prince from Transylvania,” connoting a powerful person from an imaginary land. As remote as the Romanian “land beyond the forest” was to English readers, Stoker, in contrast to Graham and her Mormon novels, exhaustively researched locales, topographical maps, and railroad timetables in order to make his story as real and as believable as possible.29

Except for her trip to Pittsburgh in 1919, Winifred Graham never visited the United States, let alone Utah. The accounts in her novels of life among the Mormons and her fictional descriptions of Salt Lake City came from secondhand and prejudicial sources. In The Love Story of a Mormon, Graham described, via Ziba Wayne’s utterances, “the great bridge, a masterpiece of architecture, which for twenty-four miles crosses the Salt Lake.”30 That marvel would have been quite a sight—had it ever been built. Her other Mormon-centered novels reveal additional glaring errors in Utah geography that, taken together, enhance the sense of imprisonment of the Mormons in their valley dominated by tyrannical leaders.31 This mystique, suggested by faraway locales, was echoed in Jacinth’s confession to Wayne, “I don’t know anything about your country or your faith.” He replied with a play on an oft-quoted scripture, “I astonish you because I am not of your country, so your ways are not my ways.”32

The physical remoteness of the Mormon elder’s land of origin is also, in Graham’s books, associated with a Machiavellian Mormon worldview. “All is fair when laboring for the gospel,” Wayne declared.33 “I speak with assurance, because we Mormons can beat the world at any game, since we
represent the holy priesthood, and have been entrusted with the keys of the heavenly kingdom.”\textsuperscript{34} In another passage, Wayne justifies his subterfuge to Jacinth in this manner: “We are permitted to stray from the paths of truth if, by so doing, we are furthering the destiny of one about to be sealed to Mormonism.”\textsuperscript{35}

**Mesmeric Powers.** A common trait in Victorian-era anti-Mormon literature was “the sexual magnetism of the Mormon male, and the hypnotized passivity of his innocent victim.”\textsuperscript{36} Count Dracula’s power over his victims was a hypnotic one, from his assault on Jonathan Harker in Transylvania to his seduction of Mina, Harker’s fiancée, in London. In the novel, Dr. Van Helsing, the all-wise vampire killer, describes a victim to Harker in this way: “She was bitten by the vampire when she was in a trance . . . and in trance could he [Dracula] best come to take more blood. In trance she died, and in trance she is Un-Dead, too.”\textsuperscript{37} Isoldi Keene’s “mesmeric powers” were established from the first moments in *Trapped by the Mormons* and reinforced by the bogus raising of the dead scene in the gypsy wagon.\textsuperscript{38}

*Trapped by the Mormons* illustrates these powers with a scene directly from Graham’s book that has since become a stock portrayal of the Hollywood movie vampire. The nighttime scene places Keene below Nora’s window gesturing with his hands and eyebrows, supposedly in a mesmeric throb, as he draws Nora to him in a hypnotic sleepwalk. Graham describes the scene in her book as follows:

For a moment Jacinth stood still, her heart beating fiercely. She knew she was not sleep-walking, yet could not explain why she had ventured forth to face the night alone. As she paused, wondering, a figure materialized from the shadows. This time it was no spirit form, but a tall, dark-coated man, with a slouch hat drawn over his eyes, and a muffler partially concealing his chin. “Angel, wife, love of my soul,” he whispered passionately, and the voice was that of Ziba Wayne. Turning quickly, Jacinth swayed forward, and was caught in his arms. “What does it mean?” she gasped; “oh! Ziba, what does it mean?” Holding the trembling form, he drew her away from the cottage, and answered in a soothing whisper—“My sweet one, I had need of you, I was sick with love. I wanted to prove my power, to summon you forth as the night summons the stars. I stood beneath your window, and, looking up, called upon Heaven to let my spirit enter your chamber and draw you down to the garden below. I worked the charm upon my knees.”\textsuperscript{39}

There is a similar scene in Tod Browning’s *Dracula* where the Count draws his female victim from her second story bedroom to him waiting below in a mist-enshrouded garden. These almost identical incidents depicted by two different filmmakers nine years apart and from two
separate literary sources produced, as they appeared on the screen, distinctly similar images—convincing evidence that Graham’s Mormon and Stoker’s vampire were cut from the same mold.

In a further application of Keene’s mesmeric powers, the mystic Mormon elder would also alter the perceptions of events in the minds of his victims. As Jacinth witnessed the temple rites with Ziba Wayne, Graham provided her readers with a description of its influence on the young girl: “In fancy she actually beheld the blasphemous antics of these people, Ziba’s power forcing them to appear sacred to the mind of the girl his love had bewitched.”

**The Kiss of Death.** Along with his mesmeric powers, Dracula’s central *modus operandi* was sucking the literal life blood from his victims with a kiss. The transfer of blood from his virginal female victims also assumed a virtual transfer of identity and a change in personality. A vampire’s kiss also carried with it sexual connotations. In Stoker’s *Dracula*, Mina declares that after being seduced by the vampire and forced to drink of his blood as he did of hers, that she was as a result “tainted” and “polluted.”

In another instance, Dr. Van Helsing reasons that the transfusion of another man’s blood (other than her fiancé) renders the female victim a bigamist! Dracula himself claimed Harker’s fiancée as his own bride, owing to her blood that flowed through his veins. In lines suggesting a marriage ceremony, the vampire declared, “And you, their best beloved one, are now to me, flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood; kin of my kin; my bountiful wine-press for a while; and shall be later on my companion and my helper.”

The contamination that Mina feels is also due to the sexual attraction and the associated Victorian guilt felt during a vampire’s seduction of a victim. When Jonathan Harker was first attacked by vampires, it was not by the Count himself, but by his three wives. As Harker described in his journal:

> All three [of Dracula’s wives] had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me feel uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina’s eyes and cause her pain; but it is the truth.

Good Victorian that he is, Jonathan is ashamed of the sensual feelings evoked by a vampire’s fatal attraction.

Graham infused much of this same sensual imagery in *The Love Story of a Mormon*. Jacinth’s “transformation,” as it were, from a young innocent
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girl to a disciple of Ziba Wayne’s Mormonism was no less dramatic. In the chapter entitled “The Kiss of a Saint,” Graham detailed the particulars of Jacinth’s initiation through Ziba Wayne’s words:

“Dear Sister, receive my blessing, and the spiritual baptism which I can give you in the kiss of a Saint.” He raised her face, and by some strange magnetism drew her lips to cling to his own, as the bee is fastened to the flower. . . . To the weak, nerveless girl those fantastic seconds appeared as a lifetime. Then she was conscious of release, he drew her arm through his own, and forced the trembling limbs to walk.46

Later, Graham emphasized Jacinth’s domination by the mesmeric Mormon elder: “No kiss from her lover had ever set upon her soul the burning seal of utter surrender. She knew this stranger had taken some immortal part of herself to imprison as his own property.”47

Elder Wayne later confided to a fellow missionary his ardor for Jacinth when he declared, “She is like a rose to crush,”48 a Victorian euphemism for sexual conquest.

Jacinth is described by her worried mother as a completely different person. “Jacinth moves about like one in a dream. She seems to be another person.”49 Another passage depicts Jacinth as “no longer a member of her home, save in bodily presence. Even her appearance had changed. Her eyes were wide and mystic, they appeared to gaze beyond with the light of vision. The color in her cheeks was brighter than of yore, like a hectic flush beautifying a consumptive patient.”50

Other Vampire Parallels. There are a number of similarities between the images of vampires and those of Mormons in the books and films under discussion: Dracula was polygamous, and polygamy, according to the popular press of Graham’s day, was the raison d’être for Mormonism. Eternal life, of sorts, was Dracula’s promise to his victims, and similar enticement was made by the Mormon elder in Graham’s book. To Graham and her loyal readers, the Mormon adherent’s fate of worldly bondage and eternal misery was little different from that destiny realized by those in the clutches of Stoker’s Count Dracula. To the English, the elder from Utah and the count from Transylvania evoked twin images of a fearful and dreaded predator.

A final similarity between Stoker’s vampire and Graham’s cardboard Mormon is in the antidote to each respective villain. The classical vampire repellent is the display of a cross or the opening of the vampire’s coffin in daylight, thus killing him or her. To the Mormon in Graham’s book, it is the “letting in the daylight” of knowledge and orthodox Christianity. Religion, the struggle between good and evil and God and the devil, is at the heart of both Graham’s and Stoker’s stories. When faced with the decision
of whether to pursue Dracula and destroy him, Dr. Van Helsing spells out to Harker, Mina, and the others, in a religious context, the reasons for going forward in their search for the vampire:

But to fail here [in killing the vampire], is not mere life or death. It is that we become as him; that we henceforward become foul things of the night like him—without heart or conscience, preying on the bodies and the souls of those we love best. To us for ever are the gates of heaven shut; for who shall open them to us again? We go on for all time abhorred by all; a blot on the face of God’s sunshine; an arrow in the side of Him who died for man.\(^51\)

**Graham the Crusader**

Winifred Graham was undoubtedly passionate about her anti-Mormon crusade. She even injected herself into *The Love Story of a Mormon* through the character of Hester, Ziba Wayne’s first wife. After Hester had “seen the light” and told Jacinth of Wayne’s scheming plans for her, Hester revealed her own plan: “My idea is to shake the dust of Mormonism from my feet and show up its villainies far and wide. If I can afford to do so, I shall go on a lecturing tour to warn all English-speaking people against this hideous monstrosity.”\(^52\)
Graham’s active crusade against the Mormons ended in the mid to late 1920s, as it came to be seen as ineffective and out of step with the times. After her husband died in 1920, Graham gravitated to different kinds of Christian belief, including a fascination with mysticism. Graham also allied herself with the beliefs of the controversial Jesuit Montague Summers, who believed that there really were vampires about in the world. Summers was the author of one of the early benchmark works on the history of witchcraft entitled *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, published in 1929. It is of little surprise, then, that Graham, writing in her 1945 autobiography, chose to sum up her earlier anti-Mormon crusading in terminology that, by now, is familiar to us: “I found it thrilling to fight with voice and pen this mighty kingdom working for self-interest, *a vampire in fact, sucking the blood of Europe with its wolf-like emissaries* in sheep’s clothing hot on the heels of British womanhood.”

Graham’s choice of words to assess the influence of the Mormons as she looked back on her life, just five years prior to her death, is significant. Her words reveal her inclination to recall events at a later time in the terminology and imagery that, as we have seen, were prevalent at the time in which such events took place. Literature, and especially motion pictures, have proven, in the historical backward glance, to be valuable time capsules of period expression, a virtual barometer of the social temper.

“The very nature of film as a supremely popular art guarantees that it is the carrier of deep if enigmatic truth,” wrote historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. about the evidentiary power of film to document the culture that produced it. Taken in isolation, *Trapped by the Mormons* might seem a pernicious anomaly, given to the hyperbole and sensationalism often associated with the cinema. However, when combined with the pervasive images fostered by the popular literature of the day, not to mention its source novel, *Trapped by the Mormons* is an astonishingly revealing cultural expression of an era as well as a movement. Stoker wrote an immensely popular book about a stranger who comes from a distant land to modern London, possessing unusual mesmeric powers, with a sinister plot to enslave his victims (primarily women) to an everlasting life that is in fact a death. Graham’s novel concerns another stranger, a Mormon, who comes from an equally puzzling land with beliefs foreign to the dominant English culture, whose plot is no less sinister than the king of the vampires, and whose female victims are likewise enslaved by the Mormon’s hypnotic powers. The film versions of both Stoker’s and Graham’s novels present virtually identical images of both the aggressors and the victims. Guilt by association rarely had it so good as when, in the England of the
early twentieth century, the Mormons and vampires, to many, appeared to be one.

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1. *A Trip to Salt Lake City* was released by the American Mutoscope-Biograph Co. in 1905. Just under two minutes in length, this silent film portrays a polygamous father with his wives and children crammed into a Pullman-type sleeping car trying to give his thirsty children a drink. The BYU Motion Picture Archive Film Series also noted the centennial of Mormonism in cinema in the fall of 2005 by screening the following films: *A Trip to Salt Lake City, Trapped by the Mormons* (1922), *Brigham Young* (1940), *Wagon Master* (1950), and two films made by the BYU Motion Picture Studio, *Man’s Search for Happiness* (1964), and *The Three Witnesses* (1968).

2. Joshua Land, “Mormonsploitation!” *Village Voice*, December 14–20, 2005, C58. The 2005 remake of *Trapped by the Mormons* was produced by Cherry Red Productions and Jeff Goode Entertainment. It was adapted and directed by Ian Allen. The DVD was released in 2006 by Cherry Red Productions, 40 Lincoln Road, 1B, Brooklyn, New York 11225. The DVD contains a feature-length audio commentary by Allen and cinematographer Christopher McKenzie, a selection of production photographs and its theatrical trailer.


4. Sean P. Means, “‘Trapped by the Mormons’: Campy Satire Probes Anti-LDS Paranoia,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 17, 2005, A6. The film’s producer, Jeff Goode, writes on his website, “It is our sincerest wish that *Trapped by the Mormons* will portray the Mormon as the evil vile perverted vampire which, in the unblinking light of day, he truly is.” Cherry Red Productions, “Trapped by the Mormons,” http://www.trappedbythemormons.com/history3.htm, hardcopy in author’s possession. This provocative statement seems to be tongue-in-cheek, according to director Allen, who later asked Utah readers to consider the film “all in fun. . . . It’s a satire of bigotry against Mormons, plain and simple.” Quoted in Means, “‘Trapped by the Mormons,’” A6.


8. Stoker’s original name for his vampire character was “Count Wampyr,” from “Styria.” Only after he began writing the novel did he find out about Vlad Tepes, the historical Count Dracula (TLS, David J. Skal to James V. D’Arc, September 30, 1994, in possession of the author). See David J. Skal, *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen*, rev. ed. (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004), 9–75, comprising the chapter “Mr. Stoker’s Book of Blood,” that succinctly chronicles the elements in popular lore, literature, and culture on which Stoker drew for *Dracula*.


12. Referring to the phenomenal success of *A Fool There Was*, as well as Theda Bara, William Fox biographer Glendon Allvine writes, “Her subtitled ‘Kiss me, my fool’ became the rallying cry that united the amateur sheiks of the world. She also enriched the English language with a new meaning for the noun and verb ‘vamp,’ defined by Webster as ‘one who uses her charm or wiles to gain admiration and attention from the opposite sex.’”* Glendon Allvine, *The Greatest Fox of Them All* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1969), 56. Theda Bara was really Theodosia Goodman (1885–1955), daughter of a Cincinnati tailor. Her screen name resulted from efforts by Fox Film Corporation to create a star entirely by the publicity department. Bara is “Arab” spelled backwards and Theda unscrambled is “death.” She was described by the publicity department as having been “born in the shadow of the Sphinx” in Egypt; other details of her life were also fabrications. For the story of her “creation,” see Upton Sinclair, *Upton Sinclair Presents William Fox* (Los Angeles: Upton Sinclair, 1933), 56–57; Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 701–4; Ronald Genini, *Theda Bara: A Biography of the Silent Screen Vamp, with a Filmography* (Jefferson, N.C.: MacFarland, 1996), 13–26; and Eve Golden, *Vamp: The Rise and Fall of Theda Bara* (Vestal, N.Y.: Emprise Publishing, 1996). The first stanza of Kipling’s six-stanza poem is as follows:

A Fool there was and he made his prayer  
(Even as you and I!)  
To a rag and a bone and a hank of hair  
(We call her the woman who did not care)
But the fool he called her is lady fair—
(Even as you and I!)


15. David O. McKay to President Heber J. Grant and counselors, February 27, 1924, David O. McKay Scrapbook, vol. 132, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. While this letter is currently unavailable for inspection, the quotation and source is as cited in Thorp, “Winifred Graham and the Mormon Image,” 107. An inveterate moviegoer in later years, McKay, during this difficult time for the Church in 1920s Europe and as editor of the Latter-day Saints’ *Millennial Star*, wrote about those who indiscriminately attend movies as “picture show prodigals.” McKay praised movies in his editorial as “one of the greatest of educational forces, if not the greatest educational force in the world. . . . Second only to travel, or seeing life itself, is the cinema!” Nevertheless, perhaps due to the release of *Trapped by the Mormons* and films from 1911–12, he countered that it “may also be a potent force for evil” and advised readers to “attend only the best. If none be good, attend none. Picture-show prodigality is incompatible with true spiritual uplift.” See David O. McKay, “Editorial: ‘Picture Show’ Prodigals,” *Millennial Star* 85 (October 11, 1923): 648–49.

16. Winifred Graham, *The Love Story of a Mormon* (London: Mills and Boon, 1911), v–vi. According to Graham, Welldon, whom she described as “one of the cleverest men in England,” asked her to speak at one of his anti-Mormon rallies in Holborn Hall in London. Meeting with him a short time later in Manchester,
Welldon gave Graham and her husband, Theodore Cory, a tour of the city. Then, she says:

I screwed up my courage to beard him in his study and ask a favour which I did not think for a moment he would grant. I had just finished a most hectic novel called *The Love Story of a Mormon*, a sensational exposure of lust and so-called love, which was filmed later and had a great success. I told the Bishop about this book and suggested if he were kind enough to write a preface for it, naturally it would carry great weight with the public. He said he must read the manuscript first and then if it were suitable he would connect himself with it and put his name to a foreword. To my surprise he was delighted with the story and gave it a splendid “send-off.” (Winifred Graham, *That Reminds Me* [London: Skeffington and Son, 1945], 59, 60)

18. Winifred Graham, “The Crusade against Mormonism: Mormons in Khaki,” *Christian Statesman* 51, no. 6 (June 1919): 236–38. Graham asserted that American Mormon soldiers, taking advantage of the war situation, came to England to marry vulnerable British women and return with them to Utah. Furthermore, “the proselytising elder is keenly alive to opportunity. He knows husbands will be scarce, and that this is the moment to replenish the harems of Utah with girls who will walk blindly into the net, believing the old story that polygamy no longer exists” (236). “The Mormon Propaganda in Great Britain,” *Christian Statesman* 51, no. 2 (February 1917): 84–86, contains an “enlightening special cable dispatch from London, England” that appeared in the New York World covering Graham’s claim that Mormons were taking advantage of the war situation to win mostly female converts. “To obtain an influence over some English girls, Mrs. [Winifred Graham] Cory said, the Mormons say that many of their faith have died for the allies. The authoress, however, says that in the official Mormon organ in Great Britain—the Millennial Star—the names of a number of Mormons who had died on the battlefield were printed, and every one was a German and born there and was fighting for the Fatherland” (36).
19. See Brian Q. Cannon and Jacob W. Olmstead, “‘Scandalous Film’: The Campaign to Suppress Anti-Mormon Motion Pictures, 1911–12,” *Journal of Mormon History* 29 (Fall 2003): 42–76, esp. 44–50. The authors conclude that “the most enduring legacy from this brush with anti-Mormon films in 1911–12 was Church leaders’ heightened sensitivity to the potential of film for reaching, educating, and influencing vast audiences” (76). See also Richard Alan Nelson, “A History of Latter-day Saint Screen Portrayals in the Anti-Mormon Film Era, 1905–1936” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1975), 19–95. This is the earliest and most detailed history of Mormon content in commercially released films.
21. Lionel Collier, “Reviews of the Week,” Kinematograph Weekly (September 27, 1928), 47.

22. A 1922 review excerpt from Kine, quoted in Collier, “Reviews of the Week,” 47, on the re-release of the film under the title The Mormon Peril.


28. At Smoot’s urging, both films, released domestically in 1918, were withdrawn from European distribution in 1921. In 1925, Smoot was invited to the Fox studio to view the remake of Riders of the Purple Sage that, on orders from studio owner William Fox, eliminated any references to Mormons. See Harvard S. Heath, ed., In the World: The Diaries of Reed Smoot (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 477, 587; Nelson, “Latter-day Saint Screen Portrayals,” 121–44.


32. Graham, Love Story of a Mormon, 4. The scriptural allusion is to the passage in Isaiah 55:8: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.” In phrasing his response to her in this way, it cannot be missed that Wayne is positioning himself in a godlike relationship to Jacinth.


34. Graham, Love Story of a Mormon, 81.

35. Graham, Love Story of a Mormon, 98.

36. Craig L. Foster, “Victorian Pornographic Imagery in Anti-Mormon Literature,” Journal of Mormon History 19 (Spring 1993): 121. Foster also concluded that authors of Victorian pornographic novels “often portrayed them [Mormon
males] as being in league with Satan and using evil arts to mesmerize and deceive helpless virgins” (128). Winifred Graham’s anti-Mormon novels contained these imageries well within the bounds of contemporary expression.


38. Wayne’s powers were credited to his being “a past master in the art of hypnotism.” As Hester, Wayne’s first wife, told Jacinth in a chapter of The Love Story of a Mormon entitled “The Worst Kind of Bad Character”: “He [Ziba Wayne] has been playing at that game ever since he discovered he was a past master in the art of hypnotism. A New York scientist taught him how to develop and use the gift of which he has been conscious since childhood” (199). Ziba Wayne also confessed to his actors in the “raising of the dead” scene in the gypsy wagon incident that Joseph Smith was also a hypnotizer like himself: “He was fortunately a hypnotizer like myself, and by the same ruse raised a young woman from the dead, and cured the lame, rheumatic, deaf and short-sighted” (51).


40. Graham, Love Story of a Mormon, 179.

41. During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church utilized vampire myths, with the transfer of blood from one person to another and the change of identity, to buttress its argument concerning transubstantiation to the peasants. For a discussion of the influence of Christianity on vampire lore, see Twitchell, Living Dead, 13–16.

42. The sexual undertones in Dracula were, according to James Twitchell in The Living Dead, not intentional in its writing by Stoker. “There is no mention [in Dracula] of this sexual potency, no mention of his incredible erotic power, but in every instance we are aware it is there. Dracula is evil, yes, but he knows how the world is put together and he knows how to get what he wants. What he wants is exactly what the ‘boys’ [the males depicted in the novel] want as well—women” (134). See also Farson, Man Who Wrote Dracula, 203–24; C. F. Bentley, “The Monster in the Bedroom: Sexual Symbolism in Bram Stoker’s Dracula,” Literature and Psychology 22, no. 1 (1972): 27–34; Phyllis R. Roth, “Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker’s Dracula,” Literature and Psychology 27, no. 3 (1977): 113–21; and Carol L. Fry, “Fictional Conventions and Sexuality in Dracula,” Victorian Newsletter 42 (Fall 1972): 20–22.

43. McNally and Florescu, Essential Dracula, 223.

44. McNally and Florescu, Essential Dracula, 222–23.

45. McNally and Florescu, Essential Dracula, 72.


47. Graham, Love Story of a Mormon, 29, emphasis added.


49. Graham, Love Story of a Mormon, 64.


52. Graham, Love Story of a Mormon, 204.

53. Twitchell, Living Dead, 4.

54. Graham, That Reminds Me, 59, emphasis added.

“There is room for both”: The paradox of Mormon culture that both interacts with and stands apart from societal influence is personified in Arthur “Killer” Kane’s nineteenth-century-style outfit while he rocks out onstage. Kane wanted to “convey a Joseph Smith kind of image.” Courtesy Greg Whiteley.
Concerning the development of the cultural identity of pre-Constantinian Christians, Graydon Snyder writes, “It took over a century for the new community of faith to develop a distinctive mode of self-expression.” That is about how long it has taken Mormonism to exploit a cultural medium for self-expression that first appeared in the late nineteenth century—the motion picture. In 1869, C. C. A. Christensen began painting the monumental canvases that would first chronicle the Mormon experience as heroic American saga. The Tabernacle Choir entered upon the world stage singing distinctive Mormon hymns and anthems at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. Mormon literature saw its first golden age in the 1940s with Virginia Sorenson, Maureen Whipple, and Vardis Fisher making valiant attempts to render the Mormon epic into the great American novel. But it is only at the present moment that we can see a distinctive Mormon cinema showing signs of burgeoning greatness. And it is perhaps this relatively late development that has enabled Mormon filmmakers the perspective to provide especially provocative insights into the tensions and paradoxes of Mormon cultural identity.

Defining Mormon film (or Mormon literature or music), like defining artistic categories linked to any ethnic or religious or cultural group, is a difficult and contentious enterprise. In part, this is because Mormon culture itself is impossible to pin down when so many are so far from consensus on how to classify Mormonism itself. While it is still a new religious community compared to the great world faiths and even Protestant denominations, many factors have conspired to foster its status as a community with a distinctive worldview, a powerful cultural cohesion, and its own forms of artistic and intellectual expression. But this cohesion by no
means should imply that Mormon culture is homogenous or static. In this regard, it may be especially useful to consider the words of Frederick Barnard, who points to Herder’s observation that a people “may have the most sublime virtues in some respect and blemishes in others . . . and reveal the most astonishing contradictions and incongruities.” Therefore, Barnard writes, “a cultural whole is not necessarily a way of referring to a state of blissful harmony; it may just as conceivably refer to a field of tension.”

Such dynamic tensions give cultural expression much of its vitality; in fact, Mormon film, in much the same way as the other arts, has come into its own to a large degree as a consequence of its serious engagement with the paradoxes and contradictions in Mormon culture. In this regard, we see affirmation of Herder’s implication that artistic culture is the exploration—both sober and playful—of tensions, rather than the glib assertion or imposition of a fragile harmony. In Mormon culture, at least three tensions seem to be especially rich and fertile and have inspired recurrent and sustained engagement on the part of writers, artists, and thinkers in the Mormon community. Obviously these three do not comprise all the paradoxes one could locate in Mormonism’s intellectual or artistic or cultural heritage, and they are hardly manifest in every instance of Mormon cultural expression. But they provide an effective framework to explore a substantial sampling of several chapters in the history of Latter-day Saints’ efforts to make sense of their place in the world and to orient themselves to new concepts of humanness and their relationship to the divine. Even a brief survey of contemporary Mormon film will reveal the recurrence of these paradoxes and their capacity to generate rich, artistic treatment.

**Searching and Certainty**

The first tension emerges from a fundamental paradox in Joseph Smith’s religion making: a perennial but uneasy coexistence of searching and certainty. The Prophet emphasized in his religious thinking the right to epistemological assurance even as he outlined a vision of salvation that is endlessly, frustratingly, at times dishearteningly deferred. For many observers, the supreme confidence and amplitude of Mormon pronouncements upon their own faith smack of spiritual arrogance and self-complacency. But these tendencies operate in tandem with a powerful countercurrent: salvation is for Mormons an endless project, not an event, and is therefore never complete, never fully attained. It is not an object of secure possession in this life. It is, in a word, agonistic—predicated on a process of ceaseless struggle. Like Faust in his dispute with Mephistopheles, who insisted, “Once come to rest, I am enslaved,” Joseph saw dynamic
transformation, not static bliss, as the existential condition of humanity and destiny of the righteous.⁴

Joseph’s crowned Saints are no angelic choirs passively basking in the glory of their God, but Faustian strivers endlessly seeking to shape themselves into progressively better beings, fashioning worlds and creating endless posterity, eternally working to impose order on an infinitely malleable cosmos, “learning” salvation, and “beyond the grave” at that. Perpetual, painful self-revelation and inadequacies ameliorated only through eons of schooling, standing in stark contrast with confidently expressed certainties about theological truths and spiritual realities, certainly result in one of Mormonism’s most dynamic paradoxes. Latter-day Saints presume to positively know where they came from, why they are here, and where they are headed. But such confidence is paired with the sometimes disheartening personal recognition that salvation itself must wait upon the laborious acquisition of an unfathomable scope of knowledge and the complete personal transformation into a godly individual. Mormons are sure of what they know, and personally and institutionally it is beyond compromise or negotiation. But that which they do not know will occupy them in the schoolrooms of the life beyond, says Joseph, for “a great while after [they] have passed through the veil.”⁵ It is no wonder that Mormon culture expresses itself in inconsistent bursts of the pat and the provocative, the clichéd and the astonished, the complacent and the yearning. “Art is born of humiliation,” said the poet Auden, and it may be in that very space between security in the possession of precious certainties and abject smallness before the magnitude of an almost unquenchable ignorance that Mormonism finds a tension capable of producing a genuinely religious art and intellectual expression. Mormon film, at its best, can be a meditation upon the uneasy balance of such opposites.

The Disintegration of Sacred Distance

The second paradox examines one of the most culturally—and theologically—potent innovations of the Mormon worldview, one that appears more as a collapse of polarities than a tension between them: the disintegration of sacred distance. “When I saw Joseph Smith,” Brigham Young declared, “he took heaven, figuratively speaking, and brought it down to earth; and he took the earth, brought it up, and opened up, in plainness and simplicity, the things of God; and that is the beauty of his mission.”⁶ With God an exalted man, man a God in embryo, the family a prototype for heavenly sociality, and Zion a city with dimensions and blueprints, Joseph rewrote conventional dualism as thoroughgoing monism. The resulting
paradox is manifest in the recurrent invasion of the banal into the realm of the holy and the infusion of the sacred into the realm of the quotidian.

Much of the early ridicule as well as persecution directed against Mormonism was clearly provoked by this unseemly blending and blurring of sacred and secular categories. As the editor James Gordon Bennett noted wryly, Joseph’s doctrine—like Brigham’s subsequent Utah kingdom—blurred all categories. The Mormons, he declared, “are busy all the time establishing factories to make saints and crockery ware, also prophets and white paint.”

Mockery of Joseph’s name (“‘Smith!’ said Miss Priscilla, with a snort. ‘That’s a fine name for a prophet, isn’t it?’”); of his undignified deportment (“habitual proneness to jesting and joking,” fumed one defector); of the concrete, historical details of his alleged scripture (“It furnishes us with the names and biography of the principal men . . . , with many of the particulars of their wars for several centuries. But seriously,” mocked one reviewer); and of his introducing Pentecost into his modern planned communities (“Visions in an age of railways?” laughed Dickens); these and other complaints pounded home the fact that Americans were not ready to disregard the boundaries that kept heaven and earth apart.

It is possible, of course, to see Joseph Smith as expanding rather than contracting the sphere of the sacred. All that is certain is that by collapsing heaven into earth, as Young described Joseph’s essential mission, the young Mormon prophet effected a paradigm shift that undermined traditional theological constructs predicated on the opposition of the two spheres. Those inhabiting the theological universe he created find themselves in a place where the sacred, the human, and the divine find new meanings and require new orientations.

Isolation and Integration

The third dichotomy, Zion as paradise and Zion as exile, the pride of election and the yearning for integration, vie for dominance in the Mormon psyche. Belief in their chosen status appears to provoke among Mormons both pride and alienation; and the opposing movement toward integration into the larger world they have fled has been fueled by both a longing for inclusion and an imperative to redeem the world. From the Church’s earliest days, Mormon converts embraced a sense of themselves as people of covenant, peculiar, chosen. Casting others outside the fold as “gentiles,” their rhetoric of difference together with a history of persecution and geographical remoteness compounded their isolation into a virtue and sign of blessedness. But their art and literature reveal a recurrent
unease with such difference. Isolation is often felt as a burden of exclusion and is frequently transformed into a quest for outside connections. Mormons insist on the need for a gospel restoration but then feel the sting of being excluded from the fold of Christendom they have just dismissed as irredeemably apostate.

But this Mormon sense of uniqueness and exile is counterbalanced with theology, rituals, and educational programs that aspire to universal integration. When he revealed that the “same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there” (D&C 130:2), Joseph was affirming that heaven is constructed out of a web of human relationships that extend infinitely in every direction. By the time his work was done, he had laid the groundwork for men to be sealed to their wives across the eternities, for parents to be sealed to their children and children to be sealed to their parents across infinite generations, and for friends to be bound to friends in a great assembly and Church of the Firstborn.

The implications of these three tensions are especially urgent for cultural expression, since art, literature, and the life of the mind can suffer from both embracing too much and embracing too little. In balancing covenantal obligations with life in Babylon, dangers lurk in both directions. Exclusivity can produce pride, self-righteousness, and spiritual sterility. At the same time, to accept and esteem everything is to value nothing.

In the dispensation heralded by Joseph Smith, the Saints were, like the Hebrews before them, commanded to “stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world” (D&C 78:14). At the same time, as Brigham declared, “We believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.” So like their exiled predecessors, without the benefits of social stability, abundant resources, or a prosperous prehistory, Mormons were surrounded by the cultural riches of a host culture that offered both temptation and promise. Once again, the challenge would be to exploit the accoutrements of a host culture without suffering contamination or loss of mission and identity in the process. The difficulty in “spoiling the Egyptians” has ever been the same: to turn the plundered gold into temple adornments rather than golden calves.

**Motion Pictures and LDS Cultural Tensions**

One creative realm where these tensions and paradoxes have provided rich material for artistic treatment is in film. The invention of the motion picture spawned in 1905 the first of what would soon be thousands of nickelodeons where short films were screened to the accompaniment of an
improvising pianist. In that first year of the new theaters, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company produced a comic short entitled *A Trip to Salt Lake City*, which portrayed an overwhelmed polygamous husband faced with the daunting task of giving his numerous children a piggyback ride while on a moving railway car. Humor soon turned to more virulent portrayals, however, with the 1911 Danish production of *A Victim of the Mormons*. Homegrown imitations of the genre followed over the next two years, including *The Mormon, Mountain Meadows Massacre, An Episode of Early Mormon Days, Marriage or Death*, and *The Danites*. The same themes readers had relished in fiction were now vividly portrayed on the screen: Church-sponsored massacres and sexual exploitation of women. The barrage prompted the Church to enter the field with its own lavish production (by contemporary standards) of *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (1913). The effort involved a cast of over a thousand, an elaborate reconstruction of sections of Nauvoo, and four concurrently running cameras resulting in a ninety-minute spectacle.¹⁰

But LDS efforts to balance the record could not compete with the lurid appeal of studio potboilers, and were soon overwhelmed by a wave of harsh depictions with titles like the widely popular *A Mormon Maid* (1917), and *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922). Others carried the weight and appeal lent by the name of Zane Grey: Fox brought both his *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *The Rainbow Trail* to the screen in 1918.

As with popular fiction, the new medium of motion pictures presented itself to Mormons primarily in the guise of a weapon wielded against the faith with, alternately, slander and derision. So it is not surprising that in the formative years of those art forms, Mormons were slow to embrace them as canvasses for their own creative expression. As the popularity of film continued unabated, its usefulness as a medium of communication grew ever more obvious. (By the Depression Era, motion pictures were the dominant mode of popular entertainment, with over 61 percent of Americans attending a weekly show.)¹¹ With the approach of the Church centennial in 1930, B. H. Roberts hoped the Church could again enter the field with its own production. He envisioned a major film based on the Book of Mormon,¹² but the project found no support among Church leadership. In the 1930s, however, the Promotion Code was adopted, which strictly prohibited the ridicule of religious denominations, their leaders, or adherents. As a consequence, Mormons seemed content to acquiesce in the kinder, gentler direction of Hollywood, typified by the star-studded Darryl F. Zanuck megaproduction of *Brigham Young* (1940).

Only in recent years has independent Mormon filmmaking begun to come into its own, characterized by tremendous variety, talent, and
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energy. The Association for Mormon Letters began recognizing outstanding Mormon novels in 1980 and initiated prizes for film in 2000. The very next year, the first LDS Film Festival took place in Provo—and showcased more than seventy film entries from around the world. Especially popular in recent years is the genre of Mormon comedy. One series of films, Singles Ward (2002), The R.M. (2003), and The Home Teachers (2004) consists of snappy spoofs that good-naturedly satirize Mormon culture but in ways that may be lost on non-Mormon audiences. They do show a healthy capacity for self-mockery and manage to succinctly depict a huge variety of Mormon peculiarities. The cumulative effect, though at times rather heavy-handed, is to reveal an abundance of droll and distinctive LDS cultural markers (spare beds composed of freeze-dried food storage), cultural foibles (elaborate ice sculptures as center pieces for thirty-minute lessons in the women’s auxiliary), and cultural vocabulary (“You’re not just an
RM, you’re an LDS RM who was trained at the MTC, who became a DL, a ZL, and then an AP, who was promised long ago by his bishop through a PPI after a BYC that someday he’d be the EQP. I smell GA!”) The coded language is a humorous yet striking sign of how fully evolved Mormonism has become as an autonomous culture not fully accessible by outsiders. But being parties to the joke, as all Mormons are, is also a comforting and exhilarating sign of insidership, like membership in a secret society.

Almost a genre unto itself is the Mormon missionary film. Stage productions (and later a video version) of Saturday’s Warrior were enormously successful in the 1970s, relying in part upon a formula that combined thwarted romance (complicated Mormon-style by birth’s veil of forgetfulness), a comic version of missionary life, and unfiltered sentimentality. The Best Two Years (2003) reproduces this formula, mixing the humorous side of missionary culture with a sentimental depiction of one missionary’s spiritual awakening that is prompted by a nerdy but irrepressibly sincere companion. Comforting in its familiarity, sympathetic in its depiction of European missionary challenges, and ultimately faith-affirming, the work is an uncomplicated film that strikes a resonant cord with Mormon audiences.

The popularity of these comedic films seems in part to derive from a people hungry for entertainment that validates their own cultural specificity. Like insiders to a private joke, Mormons can comfortably laugh at a genre that, by its focus on culturally distinctive eccentricities, promotes Mormon cohesion and reifies and confirms Mormon self-definition, even as it sometimes exploits a cultural grammar that is inherently exclusionary. For that reason, and because the films in the missionary and comedic genres tend to rely excessively upon the subject rather than the medium for success, some in the Mormon community worry that the genres will present the potential for Mormon filmmaking in a painfully limited and limiting way.

In a serious mode, some filmmakers have gone on to celebrate Mormon history and culture. The Other Side of Heaven (2001) portrayed with light humor and spare sentimentality the true-life missionary experiences of the young John H. Groberg, who spent three years in Tonga (1954–57). Written and directed by Mitch Davis, the film was produced by Gerald Molen, who also produced the blockbusters Jurassic Park, Hook, and Schindler’s List (for which he won an Academy Award). Actual references to the Mormon faith that launched Groberg on this mission are conspicuously absent. It is not clear if such a decision is intended to universalize the message of Christian service and spiritual coming of age, or to avoid alienating a potential audience.
The Work and the Glory (2004) and its sequels go in the opposite direction by explicitly addressing the message of Mormonism as both urgent and controversial. Technically well done, the films, like the books, focus on the conflicts that both romance and religion introduce into the Steed family. Joseph Smith and Mormonism are thus presented as the context for a story whose dramatic focus allows for an indirect account of the Church’s founder and early years. Though not produced by the Church, for all intents and purposes it could have been. Building on the popularity of the best-selling series (in Mormondom) by Gerald Lund, the film is too overtly faith promoting and celebratory to penetrate a larger market.

One of the first makers of Mormon films to be recognized by critics as a serious artist is screenwriter, director, and actor Richard Dutcher. In his work, we begin to see efforts to plumb the paradoxes and complexities of Mormon culture, with a sophistication that literature has been manifesting since the 1940s. God’s Army is a candid depiction of missionary work and of the range of personalities that constitute a typical mission environment. With its drill-sergeant mission president, sophomoric missionary pranks, eccentric investigators, and distracting “sisters,” the film appears a starkly naturalistic depiction of themes sacred to Mormon life.

The dramatic focus in God’s Army is on the problem of doubt in Mormon life. It is hard enough to find space for doubt in a religious culture that asserts knowledge and certainty as a matter of course. It is virtually impossible in a missionary subculture where elders are sent forth not “to be taught, but to teach” (D&C 43:15). But in Dutcher’s missionary sextet, two elders are anything but certain. One character, Elder Kinegar, has been studying anti-Mormon literature. He openly discusses his doubts and findings, only to be met by the other missionaries’ open hostility. As the chasm of doubt yawns wider, he is horror struck by the possibility that he has been deceived. His wrenching exclamation—“What if they know it’s all a big lie? . . . But they won’t tell us! Damn them if it’s not true! Damn them to hell!”—is an explosion pregnant with complex meaning. His terror and vehemence are proportional to the degree of certainty and the totality of the investment he has as a believing (in other words, knowing) Latter-day Saint. And that terror and vehemence betray the degree to which LDS testimonies are interdependent. My faith can never be a basis for your knowledge, because faith is by definition tenuous and personal and subjective. But my assertion of knowledge can be a legitimate basis for your faith, because as a declaration of certainty it makes a claim to objective truth. Mormons are admonished to “get their own testimonies” and not live by borrowed light. But immersion in a culture so saturated in the rhetoric of certainty inevitably produces the pressure to express, if not to
actually possess, personal conviction; and it produces a socially reinforced confidence about those convictions. Perhaps this explains in part the proclivity of disaffected Mormons to so frequently react with bitterness and feelings of betrayal. It explains why people can leave the Church but cannot leave it alone.

Elder Kinegar’s travail ends at the bus station in an emotionally intense scene. When the group’s leader, “Pops” Dalton, tries to stop Kinegar from leaving, the elder-turned-apostate flings at the terminally ill Dalton a charge that is a projection of his own experience: “You are so afraid that you are just going to disappear!” That Dalton’s only response is physical violence—they scuffle briefly—suggests the charge may strike close to home. More likely, the response simply typifies the difficulty in Mormon culture of addressing those who are doubting with cool rationality. At a minimum, Dalton’s reaction eradicates any moral high ground that he, as abeliever, has vis-à-vis the other, as a doubter.

The spiritual odyssey of the protagonist, Elder Brandon Allen, threatens to duplicate the journey of the apostate. And given the banality of life in this missionary apartment and mission field, the sympathetic defection of the troubled elder, and the naturalism of the film, this would not be an unmotivated development in the plot. That is why when Allen’s spiritual awakening and subsequent conversion unfold, they do so in a context that has been disarmingly shorn of sentimentality and advocacy. Dutcher thereby manages to center spiritual realities in a fallen world, where raucous roommates rather than the Tabernacle Choir provide the choral backdrop to sacred epiphanies. This may be the greatest accomplishment of the film—managing to naturalize the supernatural without stripping it of sublimity. Sometimes the disjunctions that get us there are dramatically intense, as when Allen ponders the meaning of having found his own path to the gospel via a pedophile stepfather. Other times, these juxtapositions take the form of lightly veiled self-irony, as when the missionaries hand out tracts to the film’s soundtrack of jaunty fiddle music and Ryan Shupe’s lyrics, “You’re gonna go to hell, I hope you look good with horns and a tail,” or when the film’s pseudo-documentary “afterward” tells us that Carla the former street hooker is now the spiritual living teacher in her ward’s Relief Society. The result is a work that enacts filmically what Joseph’s vision encompassed theologically; a successful integration of the quotidian and the celestial. But the film also suggests that another theological pairing—intellectual openness and the quest for conviction, certainty, and searching—has a more uneasy alliance in Mormon culture. In Dutcher’s vision, not all choices are validated, and his spiritual sympathies
are clear. But they are sympathies that do not rely for their appeal upon sentimental manipulation.

Dutcher returned to missionary themes in 2005 with the film States of Grace. It is lamentably ironic how grace can be edged out of Mormon theology as a consequence of the very paradoxes already mentioned. Coexisting anxiously with deference for authority and hierarchy is an LDS emphasis on individual agency and accountability so profound as to invite the charge of Pelagianism, that is, the heresy that salvation can be achieved independently of Christ through exertion of the will. In addition, the endless questing and eternal progression exemplified by Joseph is countered by a rhetoric and doctrine of epistemological certainty so impregnable that it can preempt faith and forestall any abject reliance upon the mysterious workings of grace. Compounding this tendency is the antipathy to mystery, the frequent eclipse in Mormonism of wonder and, occasioned by Joseph’s collapse of sacred distance, an all-too comfortable comingling of the heavenly and earthly. The result is a religious culture where the status of grace is uncertain and its Author not always the thematic center of the stories Mormonism tells, in sermons or in art. Dutcher’s project can be seen, in part, as a vigorous effort to re-center Christ and rehabilitate grace in Mormon theology, as the title of his latest movie proclaims.

States of Grace is a no-holds-barred interrogation of a challenge endemic to all organized religion, and to Mormonism in particular—how can grace operate freely in an institution as regulated, rule-governed, correlated, and orchestrated as the LDS Church? Or as the film’s Elder Lozano (Ignacio Serricchio) asks implicitly, what is the appropriate response when it seems necessary to “break the rules [in order to] keep the commandments”? Part of the film’s beauty is in the way the humorless and dutiful Elder Farrell (Lucas Fleischer) unconsciously travels down the road that query marks, in tandem with Lozano’s more self-conscious odyssey. Lozano’s decision leads him to take into the missionaries’ apartment, in defiance of mission rules, a homeless street preacher in need of convalescence. Meanwhile, Farrell finds himself irresistibly drawn to befriend and fraternize with, also in breach of mission rules, the lonely (and lovely), hurting young woman, Holly (Rachel Emmers).

Lozano’s decision yields happy consequences, as Louis (Jo-sei Ikeda) escapes his alcoholism and finds his way to pastorship of his own church (a conspicuously non-Mormon church at that). Farrell’s decision bears agonizing fruit. In an excruciating sequence, we see him slip into sexual sin, experience devastating guilt, and attempt suicide. Non-Mormon viewers may respond to his reaction as does Holly—with incredulity that a moral slip is experienced as a private apocalypse. Dutcher is not, presumably,
questioning the seriousness with which Latter-day Saints view a sin “second only to murder” in their theology. The point is rather two-fold. First, guilt that is inexpressibly intense must beckon forth a grace that is inexpressibly sublime. But second, guilt so extreme as to be virtually irredeemable must not be misconstrued in Mormonism as guilt that is irredeemable (as implied in the comment of Farrell’s father, better dead than unchaste). That is Farrell’s error. Holly’s insistent gift of the crucifix necklace, which strikes the missionaries as naively inappropriate, becomes a symbol not of Christ’s redemptive power, but of LDS awkwardness at knowing how to receive it in non-LDS packaging. Farrell’s tragedy is contextualized by the third major plot of this movie mosaic, in which gangbanger Carl finds his way to conversion and redemption with the assistance of Lozano, whose own gang-member past gives him special empathy.

If the film has a flaw, it is this: in its zeal to celebrate the splendid and manifold intersections of grace, the film can become too conspicuous in its ecumenical utopianism—as in the scene where a Latino ex-gang member missionary, a black Pentecostal preacher, a porn actress, and a white-bread
Utah missionary all cheerily toast Jesus on the balcony of a terrace apartment overlooking the ocean.

At the same time, if there is a moral in Dutcher’s tale, it is neither facile nor sanguine. For if we have been exposed to a redemption that is miraculous and moving in the person of Carl in particular, we have also been exposed to searing pain and unconsolded grief as well. Farrell’s clasp of Holly’s hand at the end may portend their happy resolution of sin, but Carl’s conversion compounds rather than heals his pain, as the consequent murder of his young brother attests. And in an irony that may or may not be part of Dutcher’s intent, we cannot help but realize, when all is said and done, that Farrell’s fastidiousness, if it had not been checked by the more compassionate and spontaneous Lozano, would have been his spiritual preservation. Pharisaical attention to the rules (no taking in vagrants) would have precluded the chain of events that led inexorably to his personal tragedy. Maybe “obedience is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22). But the emphasis here is clearly on the incomparable beauty of redemption, not on the hand wringing of hindsight. That the redeemed is in this case the Mormon proselytizer is a powerful point.

The difficult moral here may be that for the spiritually superficial, the devastating taste of sin may be the precondition for true knowledge of the Christ. Of course, that presents us with another dilemma before which even the Apostle Paul could only recoil in inarticulate horror: “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid” (Rom. 6:1–2). But “God forbid” is not a complete answer. It merely confirms our frustrating incapacity to resolve rationally these troubling paradoxes.

In the face of such logical inadequacy, film can be articulate where speech cannot. That is one sense in which Dutcher’s work is indeed “sacramental cinema.” In a cinematic juxtaposition influenced by the Godfather, one troublingly beautiful and sacramental scene begins as gang members walk almost ritualistically around the young boy they have just murdered. His eyes close in death at the same moment his brother Carl’s open, as Mormon elders finish baptizing and then confirming him, after which they ritualistically circle around him in a ring of newfound brotherhood.

In the film’s closing sequence, Elder Farrell watches a live manger scene. His final embrace of the Christ he has taught but never known is literally enacted as he asks to hold the Christ child and, weeping, finds hopeful catharsis. The entire cast is assimilated into a tableau vivant. The scene comes perilously close to sentimental contrivance but becomes instead a stylized allegory, demonstrating grace’s universal reach and power to
assimilate all, saints and sinners, converters and converts, Mormons and Methodists into a story that began in Bethlehem.

Not all films in the new wave of LDS cinema blatantly embrace Mormon themes and characters. *Saints and Soldiers* (2003) is in this regard an effort to address more universal themes and experiences through the lens of an LDS sensibility. Winner of more than fifteen awards, this independent film, directed by Ryan Little with entirely professional production values, chronicles the odyssey of a small band of Allied soldiers fighting their way back to their own lines to deliver critical intelligence during the Battle of the Bulge. The title itself is a coy emblem of the film’s double voice. To a general audience, the “saints” refers to those who valiantly struggle to maintain human integrity and virtue in the midst of the hell that is war. To those in the know, it is a clear reference to the third term of the abbreviation LDS.

The dramatic complication is two-fold. The religiously devout Corporal Nathan “Deacon” Greer recognizes a German soldier, who is on the verge of being shot by the Americans, as a man he baptized before the war while he was a missionary in Germany. The dramatic and emotional revelation, which abruptly humanizes a nameless, faceless, and despised enemy, starkly reveals war as the ultimate perversion of human interaction and fellow-feeling. At the same time, the resilient humanity of Nathan (Corbin Allred) is gradually wearing down the misanthropy and encroaching nihilism of Brooklyn-born medic Steven Gould (Alexander Polinsky). Almost the sole survivor of the band, Gould finds himself at story’s end (or is it a beginning?) prompted to retrieve the pocket bible from the dead Greer’s pocket. Only, of course, LDS viewers will recognize in the unnamed scripture a pocket version of the Book of Mormon, which will, presumably, continue to do the miraculous work of conversion it has been doing since 1830.

With audiences still largely polarized by recognizably Mormon subjects, themes, or treatments, filmmakers can alienate or exclude the non-Mormons, or employ enough humor or subtlety to entice them into the audience. *Saints and Soldiers* screenwriters Matt Whitaker and Geoffrey Panos choose instead to rely on a text coded in such a way that its meanings can be read in both particular and universal ways. This film is about a Mormon ex-missionary (and ex-deacon) whose proselytizing experiences allow him to save a convert’s life as well as his soul, while planting the seeds (Book of Mormon) for yet another conversion even as his life ends. But it is also about a noble everyman, “Deacon” Greer, whose inherent goodness, in its capacity to transcend human evil, ignites the latent goodness of a fellow human being, ensuring the survival of that which is best in
human nature and human civilization. Such strategies may prove one of the best ways to resolve the tension between celebrating Zion and lamenting lonely exile, affirming what is both culturally specific and what is culturally shared. Finding an artistic voice that exploits an authentic Mormon grammar but also builds rather than burns bridges is no easy feat.

In his second film, *Brigham City* (2001), Richard Dutcher addresses thematically what Little has addressed strategically—the uneasy demands of Zion-building on the one hand and accommodating life in Babylon on the other. He asks some of the most urgent questions a Christian can ask in this regard, questions with special resonance for a people whose gathering was, for generations, literal. Can Eden survive if her borders are permeable? When does the quest for purity become a flight from responsible participation in the world we are called to serve? The sheriff (and bishop) of small town Brigham is so determined to defeat the encroachments of worldliness into his life and community that he refuses even to countenance news broadcasts on his car radio. Because he is still profoundly stricken over the tragic death of his wife, his studied introversion is as much a credible response to grief as it is a plausible manifestation of saintliness. Whether such efforts to shield himself and his flock from the ugliness and sordidness
of Babylon represent transcendence of the world or flight from the world is the vexing question his young deputy poses. In this film's unusually profound engagement with this central problem of Mormon faith, we hear echoes of an older and more traditional version of the dilemma: “Must we lose our innocence,” as a character asks, “in order to gain wisdom?” Nothing is so attractive to a serpent, another character presciently observes, as a little paradise. But the question here is not how long Eden can forestall the inroads of the devil. The question is, what is the price we pay, and is the cost too high, when we put a wall around Zion?

Ultimately, the sheltered community suffers the horrible ordeal of a string of serial murders. Initially, this would seem to be just another variation on an old theme, recapitulated time and again in Mormon history. The Saints build their refuge in Ohio, Missouri, Salt Lake City—only to find that dissenters, mobbers, and the railroad enter the garden bringing death, destruction, and sin in their wake. Only, in this case, the sheriff finally confronts and kills the murderer—and it turns out to be his own deputy. The solution emerges only after the sheriff faces the terrible truth that the savage killings were possible only because of his own stubbornly trusting nature and insistent generosity of spirit. A little worldly savvy and skepticism would have avoided a gruesome string of tragedies. The ingredients that constitute the city of Zion made possible the destruction of innocence.

The film’s final scene is as emotionally wrenching as anything Hollywood has produced. The sheriff attends Sunday service where he also serves as the local bishop. Aware of his naïve complicity in and responsibility for the town tragedy, he finds himself unable to partake of the emblems of the sacrament (Eucharist). A shaken counselor (whose daughter was one of the murder victims) watches the bishop-sheriff in empathic discomfort, then likewise declines. So do the other communicants to whom the bread is next offered. We watch in pain and amazement as one by one, every member of the congregation declines to participate in the most sacred ordinance of a Mormon’s weekly devotional life. One reading of this shared gesture of self-punishment is that it represents a decision by the collective to share the burden that willful isolation from the world and its values entails. But—and here Dutcher is at his most provoking—to acknowledge the cost is not to repudiate the cost. The refusal to allow the sheriff to take upon himself the guilt of the group is an implicit reaffirmation even as it may be a recognition of the community’s choices that precipitated the tragedy.

In the film’s last moments, the young boy whose sister was the final victim of the sheriff’s dogged blindness reurges upon the bishop the sacred
bread. Weeping, he partakes. And then, gratefully and tearfully, his flock follows suit. For even in a Zion remote from the world, none are worthy without grace, and none are unworthy with it.

Another feature film of brilliant quirkiness and deceptively serious intention is Greg Whiteley’s *New York Doll*. The premise of the film is so absurdly outrageous that the result is a documentary virtually indistinguishable from parody. Arthur “Killer” Kane was a founding member of the New York Dolls, a protopunk (also called glam-punk and mock-rock) band that was enormously influential in the New York club scene of the early 1970s (and upon subsequent generations of musicians across a broad spectrum). Sporting flamboyant makeup and drag and playing exuberant music in frenzied performances that reminded one fan of “Jagger and Richards on a bad-acid trip,” the band flared briefly like a shooting star before dissolving in 1975. Kane sank into alcoholism, depression, and oblivion. Then, at the nadir of his life, he responded to a *Reader’s Digest* ad, heard the missionary discussions, joined the LDS Church, and became a volunteer at the Family History Library adjacent to the Los Angeles Temple. (About as plausible a development, remarks one friend, “as Donny Osmond becoming a New York Doll.”) The conversion is already a done deed when the film opens; even so, the film is a kind of conversion narrative—only it is ours, not Killer Kane’s. The central, brilliant irony of the film is the complete nonchalance of the protagonist, his comfortable evolution into his new life and role, and his obliviousness to the shock this transformation engenders in anyone observing the radical disjunction between the “before” and “after” photos. Like the ingenuous Peter Sellers in the 1979 film *Being There* (and with the same Christly overtones), or like the absurdly sanguine Old Testament character Balaam (who responds earnestly and without a shudder to his miraculously talking ass), Killer Kane unblinkingly glides from one construction of reality into another. But as the film’s central plot gets underway, Kane must enact an even more daunting transition: back to glam-rocker. But this time it is without leaving behind his worldview, his demeanor, his values, and all his newly acquired cultural baggage that seems at an infinite remove from the raucous Babylon he left behind. He is offered the opportunity to play a reunion concert with the two surviving Dolls in the London Royal Festival Hall.

Through this process that is resurrection rather than conversion, Kane’s gentle voice and tranquil speech betoken a steady calm at a swirling vortex of contradictions. In fact, there is something almost violently incessant about the director’s montages and juxtapositions and substitutions, all conducing to the same purpose: the visual and auditory and thematic dismantling of boundaries that keep the sacred and the profane
safely demarcated and apart. We see Kane the church worker, with missionary attire and nametag, morph on the screen into a lipsticked, fishnet-stockinged, flowing-maned punker, and back again. We hear church hymns interspersed with pulsing beats and screaming guitars, we hear Kane fondly described by septuagenarian missionary friends who don’t know what a bass guitar is and by admirers from the Clash, Blondie, and the Pretenders. We see him in a dressing room casually and comfortably responding to David Johansen (also known as Buster Poindexter), who asks what he would have to do to follow “John Smith and all those lovely Brigham Young people,” and who likens tithing to “an agent’s fee.” We see Kane compare personal revelation to “an LSD trip from the Lord” and hear him give a prayer that sounds like an invocation to any Mormon meeting, only this is to assembled Dolls and colleagues as they prepare to dash on stage before ten thousand screaming fans. And we realize that the guitar he is playing was taken out of hock with funds that the Church provided “so he would have something to practice with.”

The real message is articulated so quietly it is easy to miss. Sir Bob Geldorf is lamenting the imminent return of Kane to Los Angeles, to obscurity, and to his pedestrian existence as a volunteer in a church library. “He looks at home . . . on the stage,” he says. “He shouldn’t go back to that library.” As he mourns the music career that might have been, and still might be, Chrissie Hynde, lead singer of the Pretenders, softly mutters, “There is room for both.” At the concert’s finale, the band has carried it off brilliantly: the strobe lights are flashing, the thousands of fans are cheering, and the band members are an exuberant blur of delirious singing. Then, almost imperceptibly, the music fades and the soundtrack—but only the soundtrack—is replaced by the poignant, sacred strains of a Tabernacle Choir hymn. Surprisingly, there is no discomfort, no discordance at all.
Kane’s transformation from rocker to church worker was considerably drastic. As the film gets underway, Kane must enact an even more daunting transition: back to a glam-rocker while still maintaining his new values and worldview. Courtesy Greg Whiteley.

between the image and the music. And that seems to be the point: the universe is not merely capacious enough to embrace diversity but is a universe in which the real and palpable possibilities of infinite transformation make today’s differences negligible.

Kane returns to Los Angeles and his library. Twenty-two days later, he is diagnosed with leukemia and dies two hours later. It is hard to avoid the impression that a deity scripted the prolongation of his life just enough for him to complete this morality tale. In our last view of him, he plays on the harmonica a simple Mormon hymn, the kind, he says, he would play for his friends at the library. Indeed, it would seem there was room for both.

A Hopeful Sign

All art forms have their high-brow and low-brow manifestations, but the temptation to sacrifice aesthetic standards for popular success is especially strong in a medium of mass appeal like film. Little and Dutcher have resisted those allures and found at least a limited national success while engaging serious themes in serious ways. And with “indie” films becoming increasingly popular, enterprising Mormon filmmakers are likely to find the resources and audiences to continue investigating and depicting Mormon culture in highly original ways, as in the work of Whiteley. The critical praise accorded the work of Whiteley, Little, and Dutcher, and their successful reconciliation of serious moral purpose with real aesthetic merit, is a hopeful sign for all who would shatter the monopoly of Hollywood-based cultural representations.
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1. This article has been adapted from material in People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture recently published by Oxford University Press. Used by permission.


Ever since Richard Dutcher directed and released *God’s Army* in 2000, articles in the news media as well as papers in various outlets within Mormon Studies have discussed the beginnings of a “Mormon film” movement. What has been lost in all this discussion, however, is a simple enough reality: that what Richard Dutcher and others have accomplished in beginning this new movement does not represent anything close to the totality of Mormon filmmaking, but rather, success following one specific business model. To refer to the commercial films that followed *God’s Army* as “the Mormon film movement” presumes a direct link between the business model used by an artist and the aesthetic choices made by that artist, or perhaps even that the particular model used by Dutcher and those who have followed his lead ought to be preferred over other possibilities on aesthetic grounds. Such assumptions should be questioned, and other business arrangements should be considered.

**Business Models**

When talking of the business of Mormon filmmaking, we begin by acknowledging that a variety of models and approaches exist that appropriately should be included within it. Various combinations of funding, production, marketing, and distribution options yield an impressive array of possible business models open to LDS filmmakers and distributors. Of course, first of all, “Mormon filmmaking” surely must include films produced by the Church itself, under the aegis of the Church Audio-Visual Department, Bonneville International, the Church Educational System, and all the other filmmaking entities under the institutional umbrella of...
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yet even here, considering “Church filmmaking” monolithically is a mistake. For example, the Church clearly has different intentions, expectations, and outlets for the large-budget films intended for viewing in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building—specifically, *Legacy* (1993), *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000), and *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration* (2005)—than it does for CES videos; and it has different expectations for the Homefront television public service announcements than it does for the DVDs we find tucked into the *Ensign* magazine. In any event, all these films have production values in keeping with the varied purposes for which they were made and generally accomplish those purposes with some artistry and imagination. The films made for the Legacy Theater can clearly compete, at least in terms of production values, with the best work by Hollywood epic directors. And, of course, in addition to being proselytizing or preaching tools, these films provide us with invaluable cultural markers. Since the Church, as a producing entity, has no concerns about marketing and distribution, and since the intent of the films is intentionally and obviously didactic, it is difficult to imagine a better window into the institutional Church, at least as it chooses to present itself.

Likewise, within the world of commercial filmmaking are several other models for Latter-day Saint filmmaking beyond the Dutcher model that has generally defined the recent Mormon film movement. First of all, a number of LDS artists have found success working within the professional film industry that we collectively call Hollywood. Hollywood itself is an entertainment industry with multiple economic models, and both in the past and currently a number of LDS film professionals have enjoyed successful careers as screenwriters, producers, and directors. For example, Kieth Merrill, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, directed such independent feature films as *Three Warriors* (1978), *Take Down* (1979), *Windwalker* (1980), and *Harry’s War* (1981)—four films in four years, following his Academy Award for the documentary *The Great American Cowboy* (1973). Although these films do not include specifically Mormon content, they do tend to express values compatible with a mainstream LDS aesthetic. In addition, no mention of contemporary LDS filmmakers would be complete without Neil LaBute, who wrote and directed *In the Company of Men* (1997), *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998), and *The Shape of Things* (2003), and who directed *The Wicker Man* (2006), *Possession* (2002), and *Nurse Betty* (2000). (Of LaBute’s work, only his *Bash* is set in an LDS cultural world—though not theatrically released, it was filmed for Showtime TV, and is available on DVD.) LaBute and Merrill have taken very different paths aesthetically, but national critics have
commented on the specific Mormon underpinnings of their films, and both are still working filmmakers.

We should also mention Don Bluth’s animated films, including such family-oriented fare as *The Secret of NIMH* (1982), *An American Tale* (1986), *The Land before Time* (1988), and *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989). All the films listed above can be described as full-length feature films, and all found distribution within the Hollywood system. Also working in the Hollywood mode, documentary filmmaker Lee Groberg has made a series of films exploring various aspects of Mormonism, including *Trail of Hope* (1997), *American Prophet* (1999), and *America’s Choir* (2004), generally for distribution through various Public Broadcasting outlets.

Following a non-Hollywood approach, Feature Films for Families (FFF) has currently no fewer than forty-seven films available for sale on its website, and FFF has been producing films for direct-to-video release since the mid-1970s. While these films do not generally feature specifically LDS characters or situations, the intent is clearly to make films that reflect LDS family values. Also, since 1974 Living Scriptures has produced animated children’s films that derive specifically from LDS scripture. And starting in 2004, Lightstone Pictures began producing the Liken series of videos and music, essentially short musical films based on LDS and Bible scripture, all available on the Liken website and through Deseret Book Company. These efforts pursue a variety of business approaches and marketing strategies.

**The Two-Part Process**

At the risk of oversimplifying the complex interactions of competing business entities within the filmmaking industry, the observation of screenwriter William Goldman may be helpful in understanding how film deals are structured: filmmaking is a two-part process—making the film and selling the film.² For this reason, most commercial filmmaking involves partnerships between those who make films (production companies) and those who market and distribute films (studios). The standard Hollywood filmmaking model, therefore, has been one of limited partnerships. In such a model, a production company and a studio enter a contractual agreement for the creation and distribution of a single product, a film. What this means in practical terms is that a lot of interesting film projects never get off the ground because the production company trying to finance a particular film cannot interest any studios up front in distributing it. For obvious reasons, then, production companies are disinclined or even financially unable to make films without distribution deals in place. So
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studios also serve as quality clearinghouses, refusing to greenlight projects they think they cannot sell. In addition, most studios also have in-house production entities, enabling them to combine production and distribution efforts.

This may seem strange, to call a studio a quality clearinghouse, since we all know of dreadful films that have been made within the Hollywood system, but studios are fairly canny at knowing what audiences would like—at least they think they know what audiences would like. And so the emphasis in Hollywood is on putting together what is called a “package”—a combination of story, script, star actors, and effective director—that might come together in an appealing way. In any event, Bluth, Merrill, and LaBute have all made films using this complete package approach.

Bluth and Merrill essentially created a series of small production companies for the creation of their films, which studios then marketed and distributed. LaBute created an entity called Fair and Square Films for his first film, *In the Company of Men*, which he made as an independent film without a distribution deal in place. But the film went to the Sundance Film Festival, and LaBute was able to sell the distribution rights to Sony Pictures Classics. Since that time, he has generally worked as a director-for-hire by production companies. The films that belong to what has been called the “Mormon film movement” are similar to the Merrill-Bluth-LaBute Hollywood model. The Lee Groberg documentaries, on the other hand, were made for initial broadcast on PBS and for subsequent sale as DVDs. Employing yet another business model, FFF and Living Scriptures make films intended for video or DVD release, which they distribute through direct-marketing efforts. Both the filmmaking and the distribution functions are combined in one business entity.

**Rejecting the Hollywood Model**

The varying business models in the LDS film industry have larger cultural and aesthetic implications. FFF aggressively rejects not only the traditional Hollywood business model, but also the values it has come to represent; on their website they could not be clearer about that. A “message from our founder” reads as follows:

Over the years, Hollywood has gone from creating movies like “The Sound of Music,” and “It’s a Wonderful Life” to edgy films and suggestive TV. Forrest S. Baker III, founder of Feature Films for Families*, believes that the only way to counteract this negative trend is by creating positive, uplifting movies that both teach and entertain, movies that instill important values that have stood the test of time.3
The FFF business model rests on a number of very interesting cultural assumptions. First of all, the company assumes as a matter of course that its target market consists of people offended by mainstream Hollywood product and interested in a family-friendly alternative. Releasing a film in a theater presumes that a fairly large number of people are interested in gathering together at a specific location to watch it. But the FFF model implies that this may not be so, and that is all right. The point is to watch a film at home, alone with your family. Your family is embattled; its values are under siege. So gather together in small groups, watch something that affirms ideals Hollywood is attacking. This means, in turn, that FFF does not require a large LDS demographic to be successful. For instance, my parents, living in Bloomington, Indiana, will likely never have the experience of watching HaleStone’s *The Best Two Years* in their local cineplex. But the entire FFF or Liken catalog is a phone call or web purchase away.
Of course, a corollary approach to distribution is well established now for mainstream Hollywood films, with Netflix and Blockbuster Online offering DVDs for home rental. The difference—and it’s a slight one—is that FFF wants you to purchase their DVD, while Netflix merely wants you to rent theirs. Just as Netflix and Blockbuster Online have increasingly become the preferred marketing outlets for foreign and independent films unlikely to be seen in your local cineplex, the FFF direct-marketing approach may be well suited to meet the needs of a worldwide Church culture, unlike theatrically released LDS films, which may be limited to initial release in a few Western states.

In addition to FFF and Living Scriptures, Thomson Productions was a significant player in the LDS wholesale business. With a large catalogue of inspirational films available through LDS retail outlets, Thomson was the principal distributor for the films of, among others, John Lyde, including *The Field Is White* (2002), *The Collectors* (2003), *In the Service of God* (2003), *Dear John* (2004), and *Hoops* (2004). Thomson Productions closed its doors in 2006, however, and its catalog of films was acquired by HaleStone, the distribution and business entity associated with HaleStorm Entertainment.

Straight-to-video wholesaling and retailing activities are expanding as more Latter-day Saints take to selling online (LDSVideoStore.com, CreativeWorks.byu.edu, and even eBay) and as larger online film retailers sell Mormon fare (Amazon.com, Buy.com, and Reel.com). Not to be ignored are the big discount retailers (Wal-Mart, f.y.e., and Barnes and Noble), where, at least in LDS areas, one can purchase Mormon films. Wal-Mart has been particularly active in selling films distributed by HaleStone. Indeed, even as theatrically released LDS films have declined during 2006 and 2007, nontheatrical outlets for film have multiplied, proving that companies and filmmakers can succeed on modest sales to a broadly scattered LDS populace.

In 2006, Kieth Merrill began exploring yet another financial and marketing model for filmmaking by founding the Audience Alliance Motion Picture Studios (AAMPS). Rather than raise funds from private investors, AAMPS signs up members who pay an annual fee of $149, which entitles them to have a voice in family-friendly films made by professional filmmakers. Essentially, the goal is to create a studio “owned” by moviegoers. Again, the presumption is that filmgoers are fed up with Hollywood’s typical products and are willing to invest a modest amount of money in order to see films that speak to their values. Even such mainstream Hollywood studios as Twentieth Century Fox and Warner Brothers, noting the unexpected financial success of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), have begun making and distributing religiously oriented films, creating
such companies as Fox Faith and Walden Media, which have in turn released such films as Fox Faith’s *One Night with the King* (2006), about the Book of Esther, and *Amazing Grace* (2006), about William Wilberforce.

There is another assumption at work here, however, besides the perceived need to reinforce traditional Christian values. Because FFF and Living Scriptures make their films for video release, the production values are not necessarily of mainstream Hollywood quality. This implies, I think, a belief on their part that production values do not matter all that much. As long as the target audience is given a strong story with a good moral message, the assumption is that they will be satisfied. If FFF’s product is not quite able to achieve the visual texture and richness of a Hollywood film, that shortcoming is not considered terribly significant. This assumption may become irrelevant, however, with the advent of digital video technology. AAMPS, at any rate, has declared its intention of making films with state-of-the-art production values, and Walden’s *Amazing Grace*, directed by Hollywood veteran Michael Apted, is a major studio release combining technical excellence, outstanding acting performances from well-known veteran actors, and a strong Christian message.

Some filmmakers have suggested, and few have begun exploring, yet another approach, in which films are made inexpensively, shot on video, and marketed and distributed over the Internet. For instance, *Propensity* (2006), a narrative feature film about the problems of depression and suicide, was pitched to a national suicide prevention organization for advertising and distribution through its Internet site (Hopeline.com). Although online distribution remains in its infancy, a pioneer in the field may well turn out to be Mormonmovies.com, where people can post QuickTime versions of their short films. Although Mormonmovies currently operates as essentially a philanthropic enterprise, it could conceivably work toward a pay-per-download model in the future. Media giant Comcast has now begun offering films from the LDS Film Festival as part of its on-demand movie service, and at BYUbroadcasting.org one can now download either streaming video or mp3 files of BYU programming. MormonWebTV.com has recently become a clearinghouse for information and downloads of LDS film product, including trailers for such films as the documentary *Sisterz in Zion* (2006). Although the economic model for on-demand media is not quite mature yet, it seems as inevitable as online shopping and has its roots in the well-established pay-per-view model on cable or PayPal online.

**Excel Entertainment and the Mormon Film Movement**

Why, then, do people speak of a “Mormon film movement” beginning with Richard Dutcher? *God’s Army* was theatrically distributed;
well, so were Merrill’s and LaBute’s films. God’s Army deals specifically with Mormon subject matter; well, so do the Living Scriptures animated films, John Lyde’s films, and, for that matter, independent films such as Orgazmo (1997) and Latter Days (2003). (Our discussion thus far has been limited to films made by Latter-day Saints, but of course there are a number of mainstream films with Mormon characters or at least a hint of Mormon subject matter, from Orgazmo and Latter Days to Punch Drunk Love [2002], Georgia Rules [2007], and Ocean’s Eleven [2001].) In essence, God’s Army was not unique in any one area. What made it unique was a combination of factors. It was the first feature film made by an LDS filmmaker, intended for theatrical release, dealing specifically with Mormon subject matter, and largely marketed to LDS audiences by a studio specifically created for the task of Mormon film distribution. What may have been the most significant factor in the success of God’s Army was not just the fact that it followed the standard Hollywood model, but also that both parties in the distribution agreement, producers and distributors, were specifically interested in LDS filmmaking.

Initially, Dutcher did the same thing Bluth, Merrill, and LaBute did: he formed a production company (Zion Films), he attracted investors to the project, and he made God’s Army, planning either to distribute it himself or to sell distribution rights. But Bluth, Merrill, and LaBute had to then sell their films to larger business entities: Bluth to Universal Studios and United Artists, Merrill to Buena Vista and United Artists, LaBute to Sony Classics. And other LDS filmmakers had previously attempted to make independent films dealing with Mormon subject matter, only to see their films fail because of inadequate distribution. Tom McGowan’s 1977 film Brigham comes immediately to mind, for example, as does Richard Lloyd Dewey’s film Rockwell (1994), which starred Utah Jazz star Karl Malone as a
gunslinging Elijah Abel. *God’s Army* was a Zion Films production, and Dutcher began distributing it himself, but Excel Entertainment Group wanted to get into the movie distribution business, and they reached an agreement with Dutcher a few weeks before *God’s Army* hit the theaters. So, with the release of *God’s Army*, Excel, which had previously been just a Mormon music distribution company, became something akin to a film studio.

Not all films in the Mormon film movement have gotten distribution deals. But it is not difficult to see the differences between those films that have and those that have not. *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001), for example, was made by two entities: Molen/Garbett Productions, a production company started by Gerald Molen and John Garbett, and 3Mark Productions, director Mitch Davis’s production company. Excel marketed and distributed *The Other Side of Heaven*, and Disney Home Video later bought the rights for DVD distribution. *Handcart*, on the other hand, which came out about the same time, did not get a distribution deal from Excel. The producers ended up creating a new entity called Media Partners Entertainment to handle marketing and distribution, which essentially meant the filmmakers distributed it themselves. *The Other Side of Heaven* grossed a little shy of $5 million domestic at the box office, according to figures from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). *Handcart* stalled at around $98,000. While both films had their strengths and weaknesses, *The Other Side of Heaven* has made more money in large measure because it is a better-looking film. It is a better film in part because it cost more; the filmmakers were able to afford Hollywood-standard production values, while *Handcart* does not have comparable cinematography or production design. It could be argued that the scripts for the two films are more or less equal in quality. But when Excel said “yes” to marketing one film and “no”
to the other, Excel acted like a studio, functioning as a quality clearing-house. When Excel said this film meets our standard, while this film does not, that very choice created a de facto aesthetic standard.

It is very possible that Excel is the main reason we can even talk with a straight face about a Mormon film movement. In this sense, Jeff Simpson, the former Disney executive who became CEO of Excel, played just as significant a role in establishing this new cinematic movement as Richard Dutcher did. The simple reality is that many, many independent films are made in this country that never get distribution. But film, in addition to being an art form, is also a commercial venture. Films cost a great deal of money to make, and investors should have a reasonable expectation for a return on their investment. When Excel made the leap into film distribution, it allowed the nascent Mormon film movement to bypass the “independent orphan” stage of development. This became very clear in conversations I had with actors in the 2003 LDS film *Pride and Prejudice*. These actors, most of them not LDS, were impressed by the support they had received from Excel. As relatively unknown young actors, they had all been in a number of independent films. But now, with this film, they said it was refreshing to work with a company that understood what properly goes in a media packet, a company that knew how to exploit a positive review, a company that, from their perspective, had its act together. This, to them, was rare.

After *God’s Army*, Excel began signing other distribution agreements: with Zion Films again for *Brigham City* (2001), with Cinergy Films for *Charly* (2002), and with Molen/Garbett for *The Other Side of Heaven*. When Excel declined to distribute other films in the early days of the Mormon film movement, the producers had little recourse but to do it themselves. Most of these films failed, at least in terms of normal measurements. Even with Excel’s enlistment, *Brigham City* was not financially successful in terms of domestic box office revenue; and *The Book of Mormon Movie* (2003) was released without a distribution deal, but it grossed almost $1.7 million, more than double the box office receipts of *Brigham City*. Still, Excel distribution was generally a fairly good predictor of a film’s box office success.

**Competition in Distribution**

With the 2002 release of *The Singles Ward*, Excel faced competition for the limited LDS market. HaleStorm Entertainment, a production entity created by producer David Hunter and director Kurt Hale, produced *The Singles Ward*, which they then distributed through a second company,
With the release of *The Singles Ward* in 2002, the Mormon movie market reached a significant milestone—competition in distribution. While other production companies had attempted to market their own films, HaleStorm Entertainment and its sister company, HaleStone Distribution, were quite successful at it and were soon attracting films from other producers. © HaleStone Distribution.

HaleStone Distribution, created after they were unable to negotiate a distribution deal with Excel. Although other production companies unable to attract Excel distribution had also attempted to market their own films, HaleStone proved quite successful at it, aided perhaps in part by the film’s catchy soundtrack, which HaleStone also distributed. Since that time, HaleStorm and HaleStone have essentially served as production company and studio for their own efforts, including *The R.M.* (2003), *The Home Teachers* (2004), *Sons of Provo* (2004), *Mobsters and Mormons* (2005), *Suits on the Loose* (2005), and *Church Ball* (2006). HaleStone also served as distributor for two films, *The Best Two Years* (2003) and *Baptists at Our Barbecue* (2004), produced by other production companies. *The Singles Ward* has so far grossed a little less than *The Book of Mormon Movie*, roughly $1.3 million, but it cost a lot less to make.

While figures are unavailable to prove this, it appears that HaleStorm and HaleStone have also done very well in ancillary business: DVD, VHS, and soundtrack sales, even creating a music label, HaleYeah! Records, to market music CDs. Both Excel and HaleStorm followed the Hollywood model in more synergistic ways. In today’s Hollywood, films are becoming...
just one part (and not always the profitable part) of a package of products. In his recent remarks at the 2006 LDS film festival, HaleStorm cofounder and president David Hunter suggested that HaleStone has found spin-off products from their films, principally music CDs of the movie soundtracks, more lucrative than the films themselves. Living Scriptures has been particularly active in ancillary business, selling coloring and activity books in addition to their films, and Excel even marketed a satirical dating guidebook in conjunction with *Pride and Prejudice*. Mormon films are increasingly becoming part of a larger set of cultural products sold to Mormons (board games, jewelry, and various tchotchkes). Could LDS-film-based video games be that far away when we have Book of Mormon action figures being sold at Deseret Book? In fact, two of the more prominent actors in LDS filmmaking, Kirby Heyborne and Heather Beers, have parlayed their appeal into advertising and other media (Heyborne appears on DearElder.com billboards. He also tours the Mountain West as a musician and has recorded two music CDs. Beers hosts a TV show, UtahBrides.com). Mormon film cannot be separated economically from the burgeoning growth of Mormon media and marketing.

**A High-Water Mark**

In 2004 Deseret Book acquired Excel, and as part of that merger, Jeff Simpson became executive vice president of the merged companies. This corporate marriage came about because the two companies had a common vision for selling products in the Mormon market, but it is also possible that Deseret Book hoped, through the acquisition of Excel, to distribute such films as *The Work and the Glory* series, based on the popular novels by Gerald Lund published by Bookcraft, which later became a subsidiary of Deseret Book. Excel had distributed *The Work and the Glory: The Pillar of Light* (2004), based on the first book in Lund’s series. That film had been produced by Vineyard Production, a company founded by Scott Swofford in 1994. When it was announced, Deseret Book’s acquisition of Excel seemed like a significant development in the Mormon film movement, with larger implications for Mormon culture. It is possible that Deseret Book felt the need to update itself by jumping on the film bandwagon. Deseret Book had, after all, been involved in film distribution (for Hollywood fare) back in the 1930s and 1940s. It is also likely that the Excel merger had larger cultural implications, representing the hope that literature and film could form something of a symbiotic relationship in the LDS market—successful fiction leading to successful films and vice versa. Excel had commissioned a novelization by Geoffrey Card of Dutcher’s film
God’s Army, which Deseret Book distributed. The Work and the Glory was, of course, based on a successful Deseret Book novel and The Other Side of Heaven on a successful memoir. The Deseret Book–Excel merger could be seen as a continued attempt at filmmaking-literature synergy.

At this point, however, Larry H. Miller, who had funded the first Work and the Glory film, apparently decided to become more involved in distribution. Miller, owner of a variety of businesses, including numerous car dealerships, Jordan Commons, KJZZ–TV, Energy Solutions Arena, and the Utah Jazz, partnered with Swofford to found a new distribution company, Vineyard Distribution, to release The Work and the Glory II: American Zion (2005). In a sense, Miller started to emerge as an LDS version of another iconic Hollywood figure, the movie mogul. Miller owned four movie megaplexes along the Wasatch Front, which meant that, like the studio moguls of Hollywood lore, he already controlled theaters into which he could distribute his own films.\(^8\)

The founding of Vineyard Distribution temporarily complicated matters for Excel and Deseret Book. Miller’s plans for Vineyard Distribution, however, did not come to fruition, and Excel became the distributor for The Work and the Glory III: A House Divided (2006). As of spring 2007, it appears that Miller’s interest in filmmaking seems to have waned. Surely the disappointing box office returns for the 2005 and 2006 Work and the Glory films played a significant role. The two sequels cost around $6.5 million to make, and the box office gross was a little over $2 million and $1.86 million, respectively. Since the Work and the Glory website advertises A House Divided as “The Inspiring Final Chapter,” it is safe to conclude that the third installment is indeed the last.\(^9\)

For a while, it appeared as though Excel had soured on Mormon film distribution. During the three years following the first Work and the Glory film, Excel’s only releases, aside from A House Divided, were a comical documentary, American Mormon (2005), and a comedy about a pinewood derby, Down and Derby (2005), both of which were released not theatrically but direct to video. But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Excel has become more selective regarding the films it will distribute. Excel has announced plans to release in September 2007 Michael Amundsen’s Return With Honor, which premiered at the 2006 LDS Film Festival. This may also mark a new step in the Mormon filmmaking business. Such major film festivals as Sundance, Cannes, Tribeca, and others serve as showcases for films seeking distribution deals. Perhaps the LDS Film Festival will serve much the same function for the Mormon film market.

Excel also ended its collaboration with Richard Dutcher after Brigham City. Dutcher himself has recently announced his future dissociation with
Mormon cinema and has discontinued his active participation in the Church. Dutcher’s final Mormon film, *States of Grace* (2005), was distributed by his own Main Street Movie Company. The film’s disappointing reception in the LDS market may have contributed to his decision to stop making Mormon films. Meanwhile, HaleStorm and HaleStone continue to both produce and distribute their own films and films by other filmmakers, though they plan to direct their efforts toward family-friendly material, without significant LDS content. The film movement begun by Dutcher and Excel seems to have reached something of a hiatus, in other words. What Excel achieved was, at least initially, to give the Mormon film movement business legitimacy. Excel did so by nudging the movement in a particular aesthetic direction. But many films from 2005 onward have performed so poorly at the box office that the movement seems to have lost at least some of its momentum.

Jeff Simpson, who was Excel’s CEO at the time of *God’s Army*, had been an executive with Disney. When we look at the films that Excel agreed to distribute after *God’s Army*, it becomes clear that Excel was primarily interested in films that followed very specific and conventional film genres and approaches. *Brigham City* was a murder mystery. *Pride and Prejudice* was a romantic comedy. *Charly* was a woman’s melodrama, similar in most story respects to *Love Story* (1970) or *Autumn in New York* (2000). *Saints and Soldiers* (2004) is a war picture, while *The Other Side of Heaven* is a very standard Hollywood biopic. Some of these films are quite strong—there is no reason to suggest that they are all poor films—but they clearly reflect a mainstream Hollywood aesthetic. It appears that the films Excel backed were those with the most professional looking Hollywood-standard production values, as well as films with scripts that followed fairly conventional Hollywood narrative models. Excel films are attractively lit and shot and edited, and usually well acted as well. Screenplay limitations seem to have been less of a factor.

For whatever reason, as the movement progressed, Excel’s films also tended to be films that backed away from the Mormon cultural world their earliest films explored. Dutcher’s *Brigham City* had been criticized for showing various ordinances, including a baptism and a sacrament service. *The Other Side of Heaven*, on the other hand, shows a very strange healing blessing that bears very little resemblance to any actual ordinance in the Church. It is possible this odd scene was a direct reaction to the criticism that *Brigham City* received. In *Saints and Soldiers*, the main character, Corporal Greer, reads a small book of scripture for comfort, but the book he is reading is never identified, and the movie never explicitly refers to him as a Latter-day Saint.
Business Models in Mormon Cinema

Through 2003 and even beyond, it appeared as though the fledgling LDS film movement was in good shape. The year 2003 marked HaleStone’s release of the Scott Anderson missionary film *The Best Two Years.* This seemed significant at the time, because it was exactly the sort of attractively filmed, intelligently conceived movie over which Excel had previously held something of a monopoly, and also because it was the first film released by HaleStone that had not been made by HaleStorm. But the film’s production company, Harvest Films, was able to negotiate with both Excel and HaleStone, and as a result it was able to get a better distribution deal than Excel had previously offered filmmakers. In other words, *The Best Two Years* seemed to have benefited from the kind of healthy competition inherent in a flourishing market economy. The hope was that a competitive filmmaking environment, with two legitimate distribution networks, would work for the benefit of filmmakers, investors, and viewers.

At the same time, 2003 also proved something of a financial high-water mark for the industry. *The Best Two Years* grossed $1,163,450, a
strong showing, but still a bit disappointing given the quality of the film. The general Mormon film business model, in which films could be made for a budget of around $500,000, with an expected gross of over $1 million (which was actually never all that accurate anyway), was about to collapse.

The chart on the following page tracks the success of the main films released by HaleStone and Excel, as well as two independent films. These raw data, publicly available on IMDb, suggest that we can simply subtract column A from column B and figure out which films made money and which ones did not. The fiscal reality is much more complex than that. The right-hand column represents gross box office revenue. But that total is split among various interests, including theaters, distributors, investors, filmmakers, and other entities. While it would be interesting to know just who got what percentage of the gross revenues, those contractual details tend to be closely guarded secrets within the industry, and unavailable to most researchers. Ancillary revenues are similarly unavailable, but we can assume that, for at least some films, DVD or soundtrack sales were considerable. As a result, we have no way of knowing which of the many stakeholders in any of these films made money and which didn’t, or how much anyone made. The only conclusions we can draw with any confidence are quite general: for example, God’s Army was more successful financially than Baptists at our Barbecue.

Misleading though these figures may be, it does seem clear that most Mormon films, including those distributed by Excel, have not been financially successful, and that sometime around 2004, LDS films suffered a substantial drop in box office receipts. Even a critically acclaimed film festival favorite like Saints and Soldiers performed indifferently, and flawed but perfectly watchable comedies like Baptists at Our Barbecue, Mobsters and Mormons, and Pride and Prejudice all did very poorly. Richard Dutcher’s God’s Army Two: States of Grace, which opened in November 2005 and which is arguably the finest film of the movement so far, has done disappointing business, with an opening week of just under $60,000, after which Main Street Movie Company, Dutcher’s distribution entity, stopped releasing figures to IMDb.

Glutting the Market

When a preliminary version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Association for Mormon Letters in 2003, it contained the following statement: “The most important recent development in the Mormon film movement is the continued evolution of HaleStorm. What HaleStorm has done is give Excel a legitimate business competitor. I think
this has all sorts of positive implications for the future of the movement.”

In retrospect, that judgment was premature.

However, that earlier paper also stated:

On the negative side, competition may mean a further glutting of the market. With a limited LDS niche market, more is not necessarily a good thing. Two distribution companies may very well find themselves releasing high-quality films that end up battling each other for share in a shrinking market. Saints and Soldiers, the next Excel release, may well be the best film yet of the movement. Will it find itself fighting with The Best Two Years to attract the notice of an increasingly jaded audience?

It appears this is precisely what has taken place. Perhaps the initial novelty of LDS filmmaking has worn off and audiences have become disenchanted by a long string of mediocre films, as well as by too many strong films released at about the same time. The fall of 2005 provides a good case study of this latter point. HaleStorm released Mobsters and Mormons on September 11, 2005. The Work and the Glory: American Zion was released on October 23, 2005. Greg Whiteley’s marvelous documentary, New York Doll, came out October 30, 2005, but was released in Utah the following

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### Film Title | Budget (est.) | Box Office Gross
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**HaleStone Releases**
The Singles Ward (2002) | $500,000 | $1,250,798
The R.M. (2003) | $500,000 | $1,111,615
The Best Two Years (2004) | N/A | $1,163,450
The Home Teachers (2004) | N/A | $196,123
Baptists at Our Barbecue (2004) | $500,000 | $173,106
Mobsters and Mormons (2005) | $350,000 | $407,139

**Excel Releases**
God’s Army (2000) | $300,000 | $2,628,829
Brigham City (2001) | $1,000,000 | $798,341
The Other Side of Heaven (2001) | $7,000,000 | $4,720,371
Charly (2002) | $950,000 | $813,685
Pride and Prejudice (2003) | N/A | $373,942
Saints and Soldiers (2004) | $780,000 | $1,310,270

**Independent Releases**
The Book of Mormon Movie: The Journey (2003) | $2,000,000 | $1,672,730
Napoleon Dynamite (2004) | $400,000 | $44,549,956
week, on November 6, which was the same day Main Street released *States of Grace*. Three of the strongest films in the LDS film movement were all released within two weeks of each other, probably because they all wanted to beat the Christmas movie rush, and, as a result, all of them suffered.

What this suggests is that competition should not preclude the possibility of cooperation. In Hollywood, the major studios certainly compete with each other for box office revenue, but they also collaborate, through such trade organizations as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDA) and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. One might imagine that an entity like the LDS Booksellers Association could evolve to serve some of the same functions. Developing economies can sometimes benefit from protection and advocacy, especially in their earliest stages.

**A Crossover Hit**

At the same time, however, we have also seen the one genuine crossover hit of the entire Mormon film movement: Jared Hess’s 2004 independent film, *Napoleon Dynamite*. Although *Napoleon Dynamite* is at best tangentially LDS in content, it was made by an LDS director, starred an LDS actor, and deals with life in a predominately LDS community. It can be argued that in some ways, its outlook and approach are more directly informed by a thoughtful examination of Mormon culture than even the HaleStorm comedies. The phenomenal success of *Napoleon Dynamite* has, I believe, some interesting implications for business options open to the Mormon film movement as it continues to evolve.

When considering the reasons why films succeed or fail, the first question we might profitably ask is this: Why should people go see this movie? For major Hollywood releases, the advertising will generally provide potential audiences with several reasons to see any particular film. Take, for example, the 2007 *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End*. Television advertising emphasized performances by Johnny Depp and Keira Knightly, the anticipated appearance of Keith Richards and Chow Yun Fat, some remarkable CGI and makeup effects. Marketing efforts also built on audience expectations from the first two films of the *Pirates* series. A potential viewer might have decided to see the film because he or she liked the other films or has fond memories of the Disney ride they were based on, or because he or she liked Johnny Depp, or because of genre—it looked like an exciting action film.

The Mormon film movement, on the other hand, is a subset of the American independent film movement, and, for independent films, most
of the Hollywood promotional factors do not really apply. Most independent films cannot afford famous movie stars, exotic CGI effects, and expensive stunts or action movie sequences. For an independent film to succeed, the film itself has to be the star. Audience members have to be attracted to that film, usually because they have heard about it, heard that it is offbeat, unusual, that its story is not structured the way most traditional Hollywood narratives are structured, or because it is amusing or provocative in ways standard Hollywood films often are not.

This is precisely the case with *Napoleon Dynamite*. The film was the star. Jon Heder, who plays Napoleon, was a complete unknown when the film was released. When finally the distributor, Fox Searchlight, put some advertising into the film, the ads focused on the film’s offbeat, quirky charms—Napoleon unsuccessfully trying to jump his bicycle off a small homemade ramp, for example. The film is clearly informed by an indie sensibility: in look and approach, it has clearly been influenced by such indie film directors as Joel and Ethan Coen, Kevin Smith, and most directly and particularly, Wes Anderson. (The same is true of Richard Dutcher, whose films also borrow liberally from an indie aesthetic, though his influences are more likely Carl Dreyer, John Cassavetes, and Paul Schrader.) As a result, the film resonates with a younger audience, which is itself jaded

Jared Hess’s *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) is the only genuinely successful crossover hit of the Mormon film movement, grossing an astonishing $44.5 million at the box office. Here, less astonishingly, Napoleon (Jon Heder) fails to negotiate a small, homemade bike ramp. Courtesy Jared Hess.
and put off by more traditional Hollywood filmmaking.

At the same time, *Napoleon Dynamite*’s aesthetic is deeply baffling to more traditionally minded filmmakers and audience members. I suspect that the appeal of this film may be largely generational. For many older audience members, it feels slapdash and awkward, poorly structured, badly lit and photographed. To some, Heder’s slackjawed deadpan portrayal looks more like bad acting than a richly textured comic performance. And so, to many LDS filmmakers, the idea that *Napoleon Dynamite* could provide a model for other Mormon films seems confusing and troubling.

But what has perhaps happened with the Mormon film movement is that, in the minds of many audience members, Mormon films have become a genre, and one they do not particularly care for. Consciously or not, Mormon films have become known as “regular movies, only with Mormons, and not as good.” This has been particularly true of romantic comedies such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Baptists at Our Barbecue*. These films look and feel like mainstream Hollywood romantic comedies. But without movie stars to drive them, without really distinguishing themselves meaningfully from the bigger-budget films they resemble, there is no particular reason for anyone to see them.

**At a Crossroads**

Certainly the Mormon film movement now finds itself at something of a crossroads. What has been accomplished is that certain filmmakers have distinguished themselves and launched careers that could lead in interesting directions. Richard Dutcher’s *States of Grace* is a remarkable achievement, and it will be fascinating to track his future career, even though it apparently will not include more films in the Mormon movement he started. Jared Hess has proved, with *Napoleon Dynamite*, that an LDS and an indie sensibility can combine in wonderfully creative ways. Ryan Little (*Saints and Soldiers*) is a filmmaker with a provocative visual sense for style and shot composition, as is Andrew Black (*Pride and Prejudice*).
If the Mormon film movement has done nothing else, it has identified four exciting young filmmakers. That is a major accomplishment, if not quite what we may have hoped for. And the continued success of the LDS Film Festival provides a center and a home for further advances in the field.

At any rate, it seems premature to pronounce the movement dead. Chris Heimerdinger’s Passage to Zarahemla is scheduled for an October 2007 release and could well build on the popular success of his Tennis Shoes Among the Nephites young adult novels. The previously mentioned September 2007 Excel release, Return with Honor, turns The R.M. on its head and may even inaugurate a new genre, the serious returned-missionary drama. Journey of Faith: The New World, a documentary from the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and director Peter Johnson, premiered at BYU’s Campus Education Week in August 2007. Familiar Spirits, a back-from-the-dead picture in the spirit of M. Night Shyamalan, was released in January 2007. Michael Flynn has produced two McKay Daines films: The Dance, which was released in April 2007, and Heber Holiday, scheduled for release sometime in 2008. Pirates of the Great Salt Lake, a goofy comedy building on and ridiculing the affection that Utah audiences have for the Pirates of the Caribbean movies, has screened in no fewer than thirteen film festivals in the United States and Australia, though it has yet to find a distributor. The summer of 2007 saw the release of Piccadilly Cowboy (retitled Anxiously Engaged for video release) and Beauty and the Beast, and Loki Mulholland’s send-up of multilevel marketing, Believe, was released in April 2007. That is a lot of product for a supposedly glutted market. To be sure, most recent releases have done poorly at the box office. But films continue to be made and distributed.

While there have been disappointments and failures, the expanding Mormon film movement has proved that good Mormon films can find their niche markets and that a variety of business models can indeed be profitable. It has also proven that independent filmmaking can be financially successful. Ultimately, Richard Dutcher’s parting words still resonate: “Good filmmaking is the only thing that will save Mormon cinema.”

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1. By production values, I mean that combination of production design and cinematography that defines the “look” of a film, as well as the sound design and musical underscoring that determine mood.


4. It is worth noting that *The Other Side of Heaven* was not a “Disney film,” as it has sometimes been described. It was an independent film, initially distributed by Excel, and was only picked up by Disney for the DVD release after a reasonably successful theatrical run.

5. All these figures come from the Internet Movie Database.

6. David Hunter, comments given at the 2006 LDS Film Festival, Orem, Utah, January 21, 2006.


8. The complicated relationship between Miller and the LDS film movement has been covered in, among other media venues, the *Deseret Morning News*. See, for example, Jeff Vice, “2 Sequels for Work and Glory,” *Deseret Morning News*, April 1, 2005; http://www.desnews.com/cgi-bin/cq/cgi_state/@state.env?CQ_SESSION_KEY=AVUWWNCFSX&CQ_CUR_DOCUMENT=2&CQ_TEXT_MAIN=YES.


Not long ago, kids in tow, I burst in unannounced on my parents and found them absorbed in some ubiquitous TV sitcom. While we peeled off our coats and the kids started chasing each other around the house, I jokingly chided my mom for wasting her time on such mindless drivel. In reply, she playfully denounced my elitist taste and defended her show as “good, wholesome entertainment.” Well, it may indeed have been entertaining. And being a show that originally aired back in the early eighties and even then was aimed at an older demographic, it was relatively free of the profanity, sexuality, vulgarity, and similar material that almost routinely taints current TV programming. What caught my attention, however, was my mom’s use of the word “wholesome,” which seemed oddly inappropriate with reference to such a program. Innocuous, maybe. But wholesome?

After taking over the reins of BYU International Cinema a number of years ago, I noticed with a certain degree of interest that the word “wholesome” is not only used fairly frequently in our culture, but used in a strange sort of way—precisely as my mother used it that evening. I don’t doubt that most of us understand the word properly means something nutritious or edifying, something that actually nourishes soul or body. What I find curious is that the word is so often used in an altogether different sense, referring simply to something without objectionable content. Furthermore, I have noted that when the word is used in this odd sense it is customarily paired with “entertainment” rather than with “education” or “art.” There is, of course, a certain logic to this custom. After all, true education by its very nature should be wholesome, so it would seem redundant to say “wholesome education.” But what about art? On the one
hand, art is much more likely to be edifying than is entertainment, which usually aims at mere diversion and amusement. On the other hand, while art isn’t always edifying, neither is it without a capacity to entertain. Art thus seems to straddle the domains of mere amusement and earnest learning. But in either case, it would seem much more sensible for “wholesome art” to be a common catchphrase than “wholesome entertainment,” for the simple reason that mere entertainment very seldom is wholesome.

A Purpose beyond Entertainment

Aristotle observed almost twenty-five hundred years ago that while there is nothing inherently wrong with entertainment or amusement, activities that educate are generally much more praiseworthy, since they cultivate virtue, inform our minds, and habituate us to what he called intellectual enjoyment.¹ Why then do most people (today as in Aristotle’s age) generally prefer entertainment to education? Aristotle supposed that entertainment enjoys a natural advantage by providing us with certain sensual pleasures and thereby more readily chasing away our cares. In other words, entertainment primarily appeals to the body; it is more likely to be pleasing and diverting because it satisfies bodily cravings for rest, relaxation, and physical satisfaction. Education, to the contrary, appeals predominantly to the mind. And according to Aristotle, education “is accompanied with pain”—by which he meant that it improves our character and nourishes our mind or soul, but only at the cost of mental effort or physical exertion.² This explains why people will opt to watch a pedestrian Hollywood movie instead of a cinematic masterpiece or curl up with a cheap paperback novel instead of a great work of literature. After all, how many times have we heard someone say, when justifying such a choice, “I don’t want to have to think; I just want to relax and enjoy myself”? Such comments reveal all too plainly that Aristotle was right—art indeed requires much more work to harvest its manifold endowments than does simple entertainment. And at least on some level most everyone knows this.

Accordingly, since the inclination of the natural man or woman is to avoid labor, most of us naturally incline toward entertainment rather than art. And if amusement with minimal effort is our goal, most current forms of media entertainment offer exactly that. As V. F. Perkins observed about universally popular Hollywood movies:

None of them makes extensive demands on the spectator’s intellect. The dialogue and action of each of them is fully understandable without specialized knowledge of political mechanisms, sociological jargon, philosophical concepts or historical facts. None of them employs a form so radically new as to require a substantial readjustment of the spectator’s
attitude. . . . Where particular knowledge is required—then it is part of the common knowledge of the common man. The spectator does not have to work for his pleasure.  

To the degree that Perkins’s claims and their implications are true, then the common (albeit questionable) conception of mere entertainment as a wholesome activity renders it doubly appealing: first, it provides pleasure without requiring of us any real effort; and second, our conception of it as wholesome subtly reassures us that the pleasure we derive from it is altogether harmless and perhaps even beneficial. And yet that is frequently not the case. Many forms of entertainment are not wholesome at all. And a good many more are not even innocuous. By comparison, the really wholesome activities in which we engage generally do have the capacity to entertain us, but they also boast a purpose beyond mere entertainment. Dances and games, for example, are entertaining, but they also rejuvenate the spirit, foster positive social interaction, teach or reinforce skillful movements, provide exercise, and have a host of other virtues. No doubt this partly explains why Brigham Young commanded the pioneers at Winter Quarters to “praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing, and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving” (D&C 136:28)—because such activities were not just forms of entertainment, but forms of devotional celebration, instances of enjoyable physical activity, and opportunities for reinforcing social ties. While it is true that activities which only entertain, like watching popular movies and TV shows or reading popular fiction, can be relaxing and even pleasing, more often than not they also waste our time and money. And if we overindulge in them, they can be downright harmful—as evidenced by the volumes of research linking obesity and heart disease to inordinate time spent watching TV, playing computer games, and engaging in other sedentary pursuits. And unfortunately, the harm they can inflict is not just bodily.

Like Socrates and Plato before him, Aristotle knew that whether something is harmful or beneficial frequently depends both on the amount of the thing itself, and on its relative proportion to other things. Socrates advised moderation in all things. But Aristotle recognized that moderation is a slippery standard—differing not only from activity to activity and person to person, but from moment to moment. In addition, moderation in one thing can be judged accurately only when it is decided relative to other things. For instance, whether or not the amount of food we eat is moderate depends not only on the food in question, but on one’s age, one’s health, one’s physical condition, one’s environment, the amount of energy one expends exercising, and a host of other factors. What is moderate under one set of circumstances for one person at one time will
not necessarily be moderate when any of those variables change. Hence, almost anything can be either harmful or beneficial. When considered in this light, the activity or substance in question is akin to what Plato called a pharmakon—something that is either poisonous or curative depending on its application. And both art and entertainment would seem to have pronounced pharmakotic traits.

**Dangers of a Negative Standard**

Rather obviously—as my mother would readily admit—movies, books, films, music, drama, dance, and other forms of art and entertainment that are without objectionable content are not in consequence of that fact spiritually or intellectually nourishing. And if something is free from objectionable content but is not nourishing, then it is the mental equivalent of diet soda—no unwanted calories, perhaps, but nothing very good for you either. All of this begs the question, then, how and why has the lack of objectionable content, in and of itself, become such a prevalent standard of goodness? Whatever the answer to that question, I believe that the consequences are bound to be far-reaching and potentially dangerous when decisions concerning the films and dramas we see, the visual artworks we contemplate, the music we listen to, and the literature we read are guided exclusively, or even primarily, by a negative standard. Why? Because judgments made primarily with reference to a lack of objectionable content implicitly require an eye focused precisely on that objectionable content, rather than on the good as such.

One unfortunate consequence of such a negative focus is an attitude characterized not merely by an inclination to throw out the baby with the bathwater but by a reluctance or incapacity to see the baby at all. For instance, conversations with people who have been offended by a book, film, or other work of art often reveal that they can remember little or nothing good about the artwork in question, even when they themselves acknowledge the offending material was trivial. Their well-intended but immoderate focus on the bad apparently dulled or reduced their capacity to perceive the good, even within works that others have found both artistically praiseworthy and spiritually uplifting. As someone recently pointed out to me, however, in today’s world of high-risk media and subversive intentions, would it not seem highly imprudent not to exercise a certain degree of active surveillance against evil? My answer is yes, and no. On the one hand, I would heartily agree with what I think is the spirit of this observation—that evil demands of us constant vigilance against its pernicious strategies and forms; on the other hand, I would insist on
differentiating vigilance from surveillance, which denotes the very kind of unbroken and obsessive attention to evil that I find potentially problematic. You don’t vanquish evil or even avoid it by watching, monitoring, and studying it with singular focus. Of course, life as we know it demands of any moral person the application of a moral sense or standard by which intentions and actions can be evaluated. And, certainly, any attempt to live a moral life produces at least an informal set of both recommended and proscribed actions. So a list of carefully formulated “don’ts” may well be an integral part of that attempt—at least until we become sensitive and committed enough to Christ that we are willing and able to follow the dictates of the Holy Spirit directly and unerringly. But a moral measure comprised solely or even predominantly of things to avoid and a moral outlook singularly focused on the myriad textures and hues of evil’s chameleon skin constitute what the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob called “looking beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14).

I remember hearing or reading some years ago of an experience involving Spencer W. Kimball during a visit he reportedly made to BYU while he was President of the Church. According to the story, as he walked across campus one of his hosts noticed some students who were inappropriately dressed, at least in the opinion of this particular person. The host accordingly said to President Kimball, in a disapproving tone, “Will you just look at those girls?” assuming, as the story goes, that President Kimball would justify his taking offense and endorse his implicit criticism. Instead, President Kimball responded, “Yes, aren’t they beautiful?”

Now, this account has something of an apocryphal flavor to it, so I’m somewhat doubtful that it actually happened. But given what little I know of Spencer Kimball’s kind and generous nature, it certainly could have happened. And regardless of the veracity of the tale, the moral serves to illustrate my point: Where there is good to be found, even where there might also be something worthy of minor criticism, we are free and should be able to recognize the good. In short, we should not refuse an occasion to praise simply because there may also be some reason to condemn, as if something is worthy of appreciation or capable of edification if and only if it is completely incapable of causing any offense whatsoever.

In addition to restricting our field of vision, the application of a primarily negative standard in making moral choices has yet another potentially unfortunate consequence: any attempt to avoid the bad by making it the center of our focus is an enterprise ultimately doomed to failure. Years ago, when I was first learning to ride a motorcycle, I was taught a life-saving lesson by an older, experienced rider: If you see something dangerous in the road ahead, don’t try to avoid it by staring at it—look in
the direction you want to go and your gaze will naturally direct you away from the object you want to avoid. In other words, don’t look where you don’t want to go, because however much you intend otherwise, you will inevitably go exactly where you look. If you try to skirt road debris by watching it intently as you approach it, you will inevitably hit it; if you stare at an oil slick or patch of gravel in your path, you’ll inevitably run over it. The only safe and reliable way to steer clear of dangers is to focus your attention on a safe route around them. The moral parallel is obvious. The only safe and reliable way to avoid the bad is to look constantly at and for the good. Focusing solely on the bad, however innocent one’s intentions, will always lead toward that very point of focus. (And I have discovered that this is true not only of motorcycle riding and value judgments, but of any attempt to replace vices with virtues.) I believe this is why Christ teaches in the New Testament that the way toward a sinless life is not to study sins and their endless variants, as did the Pharisees, but to pattern our life after Him who lived without sin. And I also think this is why our spiritual leaders often teach us to vanquish temptation not by concentrating on the temptation itself, but by singing a hymn or reciting a scripture or engaging our mind in some other wholesome activity that will naturally incline us away from the temptation by directing our attention toward something good. Since we can’t be moving in two directions at once, any move toward the good is simultaneously a move away from the bad.

Seeking Virtue

Inherent problems aside, the very frequency of negative strategies for securing virtue raises the question, why are we so easily seduced into thinking we can become good through focusing our attention on the bad? Or to state it differently, what has happened to our notion of virtue and goodness that we think we can achieve it by applying a purely negative standard? I will hazard that this is not the intent of our leaders when they counsel us not to see R-rated films and not to listen to music with explicit lyrics and parental advisories. They presumably do not intend that we evaluate our activities exclusively in accordance with some secular and capricious rating system, nor do they imply that all media without those restrictive ratings are edifying, nor do they suggest that we should not actively seek out really praiseworthy art and entertainment. After all, we do not identify something as “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” simply on the basis of what it is not, but also, and primarily, on the basis of what it is.
Consider in this regard the entire thirteenth article of faith:

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

As Joseph Smith intimated, this article of faith paraphrases an admonition of Paul found in his epistle to the Philippians: “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” (Philip. 4:8). It is worth noting that only one adjective in Joseph’s paraphrase of Paul is repeated. It is the word “virtuous.” As many are aware, the word “virtue” has a most interesting pedigree in Western civilization. It is the word most often used to translate the Greek arete (ἀρετή), which, in fact, is the word originally spoken by Paul in the passage above. Though arete was examined and discussed by several pre-Socratic philosophers, it was Socrates who first attributed real philosophical importance to it and identified arete in its most general sense with a knowledge of the Good. For Aristotle, several generations later, arete named the fluctuating point of moderation, the mean or midpoint between two extremes, and it could take the form of either a moral or an intellectual virtue. But in every case for the Greeks, virtue meant goodness or excellence of some kind—excellence of character or behavior, excellence in work or accomplishments, excellence of aspirations. In short, it referred not just to a lack of bad qualities, but to an abundance of good ones—to a combination of all those qualities and attributes which together would constitute a praiseworthy and exemplary life.

Lamentably enough, we seem to have diluted the word “virtue” to where it now refers to only one single aspect of an excellent life: chastity and purity of thought. But however important chastity is (and I’m not for a moment suggesting that it isn’t important), there is much more to an excellent life than chastity, as both Paul and Joseph Smith well knew—which is probably why they mentioned both chastity and virtue in the passages quoted above, and not just chastity. Virtue or excellence in this broader, more substantial sense is precisely what we all ought to be striving for, not just as Christians, but as lifelong educators and learners. And we cannot reach that goal by compiling only a list of “don’ts” or by complying with narrowly rendered interpretations of counsel to avoid particular actions,
behavior, or circumstances—however well-intentioned those interpretations might be; we must, first and foremost, actively seek the good.

Lastly, in order to nurture and preserve our own personal virtue as well as to encourage and safeguard virtue in the arts, we must strive to judge the bad with as much honesty and temperance as zeal. I would thus identify a third unfortunate consequence of judging the worth of our actions by a predominantly negative standard as the dangerous tendency to act as though a righteous end justifies unrighteous means. If we look predominantly for flaws and fail to see virtues, we run the risk of amplifying offenses out of all proportion—and that is only a short step away from outright dishonesty. As my BYU colleagues and I have sadly noted, all too often the complaints with which we sometimes have to deal as teachers, mentors, and program directors either significantly exaggerate an offense or completely misrepresent it. A book or play with one or two profane words becomes in such a complaint a work full of them; a Greek statue in an art history text or an unclothed newborn in a film becomes in the retelling a case of scandalous nudity; a tender caress becomes lewd, groping sex. Perhaps those who judge in such a fashion have become so obsessed with the bad that they see or hear things in a book or film that are not actually there. Either this is the case, or they have become willing to use dishonest means in order to defend what they apparently see as a desirable end. And when such complaints are aired publicly, they not only compromise the truth, but can unjustly sully the reputation of an artwork, a person, or an institution—all under the guise of righteous indignation. Clearly, something is very wrong when this happens.

Above all else, we need to seek the good not just in order to avoid the bad, but to become good. And we need to recognize that when we are seeking what is virtuous, lovely, good, and praiseworthy, it rarely comes (at least from any worldly source) with everything objectionable completely refined out of it, especially since what is deemed objectionable differs so greatly from person to person, culture to culture, and age to age. Even the writings of Shakespeare, lovingly carried across the plains by our pioneer ancestors and so often quoted in LDS books and general conferences, contain their fair share of potentially objectionable material. But we read Shakespeare despite that fact because there is so much to praise among what little there is to condemn.

Learning to Recognize Good Art

I would venture to say that the reason why schools, universities, teachers and artists draw a disproportionate amount of criticism in this regard
is not because the subject matter they teach or create is disproportionately objectionable, or that they have simply become callous to offensive material. After all, no institution, artist or teacher wants to draw criticism. And it is certainly possible to teach a course or create a work with little real objectionable content (although I’ve found to my astonishment that people who actively look for reasons to be offended can find them almost anywhere). One could teach art history without exposing students to a single unpleasant image, violent scene, or nude statue; one could teach literature from books that contain not a single profane word, violent act, or idea contrary to our own. But what kind of courses would they be without the likes of Myron, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Twain? What distorted and impoverished picture of the human experience would be the result? And what kind of service would we be rendering if we simply engaged and re-engaged familiar, comfortable, and often mediocre material chosen primarily by reference to a negative standard, and chosen only to safeguard us from every possible complaint or offense? BYU has often drawn criticism—and will continue to do so, I suspect—precisely because so many of our faculty are laboring conscientiously under the inspired mandate to seek after the good and are striving as well to teach their students how to do the same thing. But not everyone’s definition of the good is equivalent. And more importantly, as we have already noted, actively seeking the good (or teaching another how to do so) is no easy or relaxing task.

First of all, seeking after the good requires, in addition to effort, considerable sacrifice and commitment. In an address entitled “Counterfeits: A Mess of Pottage,” Barta Heiner, who teaches in the Theatre and Media Arts Department at BYU, shared the following story of her own personal odyssey:

About seven years ago, I was performing with Denver Center Theatre Company and teaching at the National Theatre Conservatory. I was in an ideal situation, one that my professional peers in other cities would envy. Then I received a call from one of my former teachers at BYU. There was an opening in the department to teach acting. I said, “No, thank you.” Returning to Provo would have been like committing professional suicide. A couple of months later the same offer came and I was encouraged to really think about it. So I did, and I prayed. I got this feeling that I was to return to BYU. I started to analyze myself. Was that a spiritual prompting or just indigestion? Was that really what God wanted me to do? Or just sentimentalism? . . . I prayed again; another prompting? I wasn’t sure. . . . And what if it was? Then I got angry. I didn’t pray for about two weeks. I thought, “I’m a professional actress! I’ve worked long and hard to be where I am. I don’t want to go back to teach at BYU!” I struggled and pondered, and a thought came to me: “I am teaching a group of amoral people to succeed
in acting. Who is teaching those people who want to be moral how to succeed in acting?\textsuperscript{244}

I am entirely sure that many of my colleagues here at BYU have had similar experiences, and they have made similar sacrifices in order to teach art, film, and literature to BYU students. And they have run the risk of offending someone in the process.

But seeking after virtue as a teacher requires not only personal sacrifice and commitment; it also requires talent, a sensitive eye, an understanding heart, and the ability to recognize, highlight, and disentangle the good from the bad in such a way that others can learn to do likewise. As Hugh Nibley once explained while speaking of gospel culture, it requires us to sift through the world’s contributions and to put our own seal on it.\textsuperscript{5} But how do we do this? On the one hand, we must indeed be selective. Brigham Young once advised, “I cannot say that I would recommend the reading of all books, for it is not all books which are good. Read good books, and extract from them wisdom and understanding as much as you possibly can, aided by the Spirit of God.”\textsuperscript{6} On the other hand, as Brigham Young also advised, we must be open-minded and appreciative of all genuine truth and beauty—regardless of its source: “If men would be great in goodness, they must be intelligent, for no man can do good unless he knows how; therefore seek after knowledge, all knowledge, and especially that which is from above.”\textsuperscript{7} Likewise, he once warned, “Let us not narrow ourselves up; for the world, with all its variety of useful information and its rich hoard of hidden treasure, is before us.”\textsuperscript{8} John Taylor similarly taught that we should embrace any and all truth that is calculated to benefit us, regardless of “what shape it comes in, who brings it or who believes in it,”\textsuperscript{9} and he advocated that we “foster education and intelligence of every kind,” and actively cultivate literary and artistic talent and taste.\textsuperscript{10}

Now, none of these admonitions is an endorsement of art, film, or literature that is degrading, gratuitously profane or violent, pornographic, or otherwise offensive to the Spirit or harmful to the soul. Such material should indeed be avoided in our classrooms and in our private lives, even when that material might appear in a context that includes otherwise praiseworthy elements. So in this regard, a moderate, mature, and prudently formulated conception of things to avoid is appropriate and maybe even necessary. But that formulation must still derive from and answer to a loftier goal than a mere avoidance of offensive material independently conceived as such. As the prophets and other Church leaders have so often repeated, we \textit{should} have a higher standard than that endorsed by the world at large—a standard that, yes, protects us from the bad when possible, but that also draws us to the good and produces thereby a Christlike
life, not just a protected one. Does this mean religious knowledge is the only kind of knowledge we should seek? No. Is devotional art, religious art, or art produced by and for Latter-day Saints the only kind of art we should create, view, and allow our students to view? No. Is the art produced by the world or art that is not completely inoffensive necessarily and completely worthless as a result, or even blameworthy? No—of course not. If it were, then we could not praise a pagan Greek temple like the Parthenon, which numerous Church leaders have done—despite the nude figures and violent scenes on its friezes and pediments. Can we produce our own great artists and students of art by turning our back on what the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others of the world can teach us? Again, the answer is no. So, the real question is not, how do we completely avoid the world and its influence in producing, teaching, and appreciating art? It is, how do we teach and learn to seek after what is virtuous, lovely, of good report or praiseworthy in the world, and despite the world’s failings? And how do we identify and evaluate virtue in art without simply looking for vice or its absence?

Well, perhaps the first step in answering those questions would be to recognize that art is important. And it is not always entertaining; more often than not art educates in a decidedly demanding, unentertaining fashion. And good art, whether by entertaining or by educating, always enriches life in ways no other human enterprise can do. Hence, it should be taken seriously, with maturity, and, at times, with a certain degree of tolerance—as the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume once claimed in arguing that we should be capable of excusing religious and cultural differences in works of art. Why? Because those differences are so fluctuating and various that it would be ridiculous to expect the beliefs of every culture and people to resemble our own. But more importantly, it would be simply wrong to assume that artworks which manifest such differences cannot otherwise enrich or educate us. In order to understand how good art enriches and educates, however, we also need to learn and teach the language, history, conventions, and rhetoric of the various arts. Such learning would constitute an important second step, acquainting ourselves with art that does not merely reflect our own views and preferences. A third essential step in seeking virtue among the arts might be to thoughtfully and fairly evaluate individual artworks in the light of our personal motives, maturity, and expectations, and in accordance with the manifest ability of the art in question to improve our perception, understanding, and appreciation of the world and of others. Does Van Gogh’s _Starry Night_ reveal to the unbiased eye a vision of the heavens and our place beneath them that enriches our perception, understanding, and
appreciation of life, or does it not? And if it fails that test, do the experiences of others suggest that failing to be the artist’s or my own?

Of course, all of this reflection and analysis requires substantial effort—which is partly why an engagement with real art is often not entertaining or relaxing, and why it is often criticized or avoided by those seeking mere amusement. When film director Michelangelo Antonioni screened *L’avventura* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1962 he was booed off the stage by the audience. His film was so intellectually demanding that viewers accustomed to effortless entertainment, as well as schooled and experienced critics, were challenged beyond their expectations. Nevertheless, his film was subsequently awarded a special jury prize for “a new movie language and the beauty of its images.” Antonioni has since become known as one of the world’s greatest filmmakers, and *L’avventura* was rated in a 1962 *Sight and Sound* critics’ poll as the third best film ever made (an evaluation it has largely maintained in subsequent polls). Real art challenges us and stretches our abilities, but in consequence it also nourishes us both intellectually and spiritually. In other words, unlike mere entertainment, genuine art is genuinely wholesome.

**Preparing to Create and Appreciate Great Art**

In a videotaped interview entitled “The Artist and the Spirit,” Boyd K. Packer was asked, “Do you still think that art makes a difference, that the arts are important to us as human beings on this earth?” President Packer replied, “Well, just erase them, and what would you have? . . . It would be intolerable, insufferable.” He doesn’t quite say, as does Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that “the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” but he comes pretty close. Then again, what kind of art did President Packer have in mind when he made this remarkable claim? He specifically mentioned the art of the ancients, and suggested through references to the Pythagoreans that he especially had in mind Greek art and architecture. And speaking to the question of whether LDS artists should produce only art that is religious, he answered, no—certain circumstances call for devotional art, but not all art need be devotional to be good: “The beauty is you can do anything you want,” he explained. “Everything that is lovely, or praiseworthy, of good report—we seek after these things. So the marvelous thing is that members of the Church in the arts can do what they want. They can produce symphonic music, or they can produce ballads, religious music, or whatever. But they ought to do it well, and they have the right to do it with inspiration.”
Earlier in the interview, speaking specifically about how LDS artists can prepare to “do it well,” he said that talent and inspiration are not enough; great artists, writers, and musicians need to be trained—which means, at least in part, that they need to learn what the world has to teach. After he was asked what he thought about turn-of-the-century LDS artists like John Hafen (an art missionary who went at Church expense to study drawing and painting in the very worldly salons of nineteenth-century Paris in order to prepare to paint the Salt Lake Temple murals—and who produced in the course of that training, along with fellow art missionaries, numerous nude drawings and paintings now owned by the BYU and Church museums of art), Elder Packer said the following:

The temple was underway, and it was about to the point where they were going to do the interiors and the appointments, and so they called to begin with four brethren and they sent them to Paris to study painting in order to do the interior painting. And I thought that that’s a lesson because we have members in the Church who are in the field of the arts and who have an idea that “inspiration will come, and I have talent, and that’s all I need.” Well, they had inspiration, and they had all the talent, but they needed to be trained, they needed to do the work, to learn the fundamentals, the basics, in order that they could produce works of art, particularly in the temple, that would be creditable. 14

He then referred to Oliver Cowdery’s failed attempt to translate the Book of Mormon by relying only on inspiration, and said that just as Oliver Cowdery had to do everything within his power first, so too do our artists. And we might add: so too do ordinary learners and teachers.

Artists and students of art have to work. They have to train. They have to learn from the world and from the history of art, film, and literature everything they can that is virtuous, lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy. And we as teachers have a sacred obligation to help them. Of course, we don’t fulfill that obligation by using degrading materials and methods; but neither do we fulfill it by teaching a Shakespeare class in which we only read those passages that contain nothing that could possibly offend. We don’t fulfill it by teaching art history classes in which we show slides of paintings and sculptures that are patently offensive and disrespectful of the human body and human relations; but neither do we fulfill it by showing only slides of those artworks that contain nothing that could possibly offend. We fulfill our obligation by carefully and prayerfully deciding what materials to use, and then, by prudently using those materials—and by teaching others, by example and by principle, how to seek for and to recognize on their own the good, the true, and the beautiful—even when tainted, at times, by elements we don’t endorse but can excuse when they’re not too serious.
Seeing Life Whole

Brigham Young, who organized the Deseret Dramatic Association just two years after entering the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and opened the first playhouse west of the Missouri River only four years later, in 1853, wrote the following about theater—though we can extrapolate his remarks to any and all of the arts:

Upon the stage of a theater can be represented in character, evil and its consequences, good and its happy results and rewards; the weakness and the follies of man, the magnanimity of virtue and the greatness of truth. The stage can be made to aid the pulpit in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous life, also a proper horror of the enormity of sin and a just dread of its consequences. The path of sin with its thorns and pitfalls, its gins and snares can be revealed, and how to shun it.\(^{15}\)

Brigham Young suggests here that art has the capacity to reveal what Aristotle in the *Poetics* called “universal truths.”\(^ {16}\) This capacity is perhaps what Gerrit de Jong called “culture”: the ability to see life whole. De Jong wrote, “To be familiar with the best that has been thought and the best that has been done in the world—that is *culture*.”\(^ {17}\) But being familiar with the best that has been thought and done does not mean being familiar only with portrayals of what Brigham Young called in the above-mentioned passage the “good and its happy results.” It also means being familiar with wise, truthful, and tasteful treatments of “evil and its consequences.” In other words, art can and sometimes should address troubling matters—ironically, obliquely, and tastefully, but address them all the same. Admittedly, since artists and teachers are no more perfect than the rest of us, those treatments are sometimes less wise, truthful, and tactful than they should be. But unless they are flawed by serious offenses, we should be able and willing to glean the good and deal judiciously with the rest.

Later in the address where Gerrit de Jong defined culture, he spoke of a colleague in the English department who advised a new student that she needed to take a freshman English class. “Do I have to take some more of that?” she complained. Apologetically, he insisted that, yes, she did. The girl then indignantly replied, “Well, I ain’t never studied much of it, but I speak as good as them what has.”\(^ {18}\) I think that when we as teachers or parents fail in our responsibility to expose our students or children to great art, film, and literature, merely out of fear that they (or someone else) will find offense or complain, and when as students or learners we insist upon such treatment, we silently conspire with each other to underwrite a cultural illiteracy that is every bit as pathetic and spiritually stunting as was this young girl’s speech. We do each other no true service. We light no fire
in each other's heart. And we decidedly do not seek that which is virtuous, lovely, of good report or praiseworthy.

In an Italian film entitled *Cinema Paradiso*, a fatherless boy grows up enamored of the movies and is mentored by the kindly projectionist of the town's only theater. But he lives in a small, provincial community in an age long past, and the local priest (with only the best of intentions) edits out of every film every expression of love, passion, or physical affection: every kiss, every embrace, every caress. Some of the scenes deserve editing, but most do not. Over the course of *Cinema Paradiso*, the boy grows into a man, falls in love with a beautiful girl, loses her, moves to the big city, becomes a famous movie director, and in the end, finds himself restless and dissatisfied with life, perpetually unable to realize true love and happiness. When the old projectionist dies, his protégé finally returns home and after the funeral discovers a gift from his old friend: a reel of film, composed entirely of clips that the old man had been forced to cut from the films he had shown while the boy was growing up. It is a breathtaking montage of love, passion, and life. *Cinema Paradiso*, as the title intimates, ends with the suggestion that art and dedicated teachers can help us redeem a fragmented life—the affection and passion that had been edited out of the protagonist’s life by the tragedies and circumstances of his fatherless childhood and lost love are restored to him from beyond the grave by someone who cared for him as much as any father—and art is the medium of that restoration.

In conclusion, I hope that, yes, we will be wise and careful in deciding what art we appreciate and what principles we embrace and teach, but that we will also redouble our commitment to kindle and rekindle in each other's hearts the passion for art, beauty, philosophy, and literature that fired the flame of our own various searches after the virtuous, the lovely, and the praiseworthy. I hope that we will actively seek the good and not merely avoid the bad. And I hope that we will be judicious and not judgmental, admitting to ourselves and to others that measured tolerance is a significant virtue in itself. Finally, may I at once endorse a higher standard of taste than is the mundane norm and yet suggest as well that our efforts both to articulate that standard and to comply with its dictates should be performed in the service of virtue, not in its stead.

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17. Gerrit de Jong, “Art and Life,” address to the BYU student body, January 5, 1953, 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, emphasis in original.

Active Spectatorship
Spiritual Dimensions of Film

Sharon Swenson

M enacing music signals something ominous. My three-year-old grandson, Gavin, looks up at me, and we hug each other closer under the quilt, shivering in anticipation. In the background is . . . something . . . and it's getting closer and closer. What seemed like something small and close by is really something large and far away and getting closer by the second. Squeeze tighter; Gavin glances up at me and giggles, but I remain serious and calm, preparing for whatever might come. It’s a whale! Zooming toward us!

We’re watching Finding Nemo (2003), and in their efforts to find Nemo, Dory and Marlin have encountered a mammoth mammal—and Dory has even asked him for help. Gavin and I snuggle deeper into the recliner, ready to see what this tiny blue fish and white-striped orange clownfish will do next. Our anxiety is justified; the whale looms up, gathering Dory and Marlin in a mouthful of krill. They float down his gullet, past his gigantic teeth. Marlin struggles to hang on, to stay where he is. Dory encourages Marlin, seeing it as one more adventure. “Just keep swimming,” she says. Will her trust be repaid? Finally, after Marlin releases his anxiety and control and just floats with Dory inside the whale, the two little fish are shot straight into the air through the whale’s spout. The whale has moved them closer to their goal. But Marlin will have to relearn the lesson that he has to let go—and so will I, I reflect as I pull Gavin nearer to me.

It’s early evening and I’m walking from my university office to the parking lot. I’m carrying three bags—my purse; my briefcase with laptop; and another bag of papers that need to be read and graded, administrative documents that need to be dealt with, and scholarly materials that need to
be reviewed. I’m weighted down, not just by the physical burdens but by the obligations they represent. And then there’s finalizing the Gospel Doctrine lesson for Sunday morning. And planning meals and buying groceries. As I trudge along, tired, suddenly I hear Dory saying, “Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming. I looove to swim.” And then I smile and remember that I’ve chosen to do all this work and to care for people I love and that the weekend also includes Gavin sleeping over and the Saturday morning ritual of a pancake breakfast and grocery shopping with “Unca Johnny.” I’m grateful for what I’ve learned from a fictional blue fish named Dory, which is intertwined with other nurturing and challenging material I use in my efforts to continue to grow spiritually.

My understanding of how God works in our lives is expanded and clarified through film—watching, teaching, reflecting on, and talking about film in a variety of circumstances. The power of image-driven story can be a useful tool to provide additional ways we consider our spiritual nature; personally, my experience of films has increasingly become useful in understanding myself and others, particularly in spiritual dimensions. My understanding of how God works in our lives, especially in my own, is expanded and clarified through film—watching, teaching, reflecting on, and talking about film. I believe it can be a useful tool that provides new ways to consider our spiritual nature, strengths and weaknesses, particularly in our ways of relating to others.

Why Study Film as a Spiritual Guide?

We may find it hard to take film seriously and relate film to spirituality, particularly if most of our experience has been that film watching is something we do in our leisure time or something we don’t participate in much. Or we may be concerned about film’s spiritual impact because so many films can be harmful to our souls. If film is something pushed to the edges of our inner life as a respite from thinking, or if we dismiss it largely due to its worldly character and common misuses, we may feel uncomfortable contemplating film in this manner. “This is not what we do with movies,” we may say. It’s possible that we may take film as a serious part of our spirituality only if we feel a movie threatens our values, or we may doubt that something often perceived primarily as a diversion could have deep meaning for us.

But my film studies colleagues and students and I believe in the capacity of film to help transform people’s lives for the better. We are not seeking knowledge about films per se; we are seeking to know what our perceptions
and responses to film tell us about our spiritual nature. Being viewers of film and taking that spectatorship (how we engage with the screen’s images) seriously is part of our spiritual lives; it can be a positive way of expanding our self-awareness and spiritual growth. Thus this process of viewing film is not primarily about film—it’s about ourselves, especially the parts of ourselves we have the hardest time seeing, the places we need to fix or attend to. It’s about seeing the parts of ourselves that others might easily recognize but that are hard for us to get a clear fix on. Film can offer insights, training experiences, vicarious knowledge, and an acting out of others’ life experience and “soul states” that may help us develop spiritually.

Reflecting on what happens to me as I watch films—in conjunction with my personal scripture study, prayer, journal writing, and contemplation of what the Lord would have me do—allows me to see the ways I need to change and can change. Because of the way film is constructed and operates, we can use it to understand important things about ourselves and others. In academia, there are useful concepts about how film influences spectators, but their framing in scholarly discourse limits the accessibility of such concepts. Drawing on that academic background and my own inner uses of films, I have identified several dimensions of experiencing films that demonstrate the depth of meaning possible from spiritual engagement with film. These dimensions function in the repeated experiences of watching and reflecting about ordinary films like *Finding Nemo*.

We watch and reflect on films using our knowledge as perceptive beings with moral agency and insight. These meditations can be a powerful tool to deepen our efforts to know ourselves, others, and the Lord. My experiences with *Finding Nemo* can demonstrate this use of film for spiritual development, including some related aspects of film theory. Although I study film as a profession and view it for pleasure, *Finding Nemo* is a film that mattered to me initially because it was something that I shared with my grandson. It is a mainstream animated film that I brought home because I thought Gavin might like it. And he did—we both did. We watch it frequently, together, sitting under a blanket in our favorite chair. The personal context of viewing is important here: Gavin and I watch *Finding Nemo* over and over. It’s one of the many things we enjoy doing together, and I have learned from it.

The film, directed by Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, focuses on a clownfish (Nemo) who is stolen from his coral reef home by a diver who is a dentist in Sydney, Australia. Nemo’s father, Marlin, is timid and overprotective of his son, just like a grandmother can often be. The film’s actions are the parallel encounters Nemo and Marlin have as they struggle
to reunite. In the course of this plot, both learn to trust others to help them and to trust themselves.

**Film Watching Is Both Personal and Communal**

Film watching is one of the most common and yet least acknowledged forms of sharing in contemporary culture: we share the act of having viewed many of the same films, the knowledge of popular movie quotes such as “Make my day,” and the experience of a common action of living vicariously. Culturally, we most often watch film as part of a group, whether in a theater or at home, but we respond as much privately as we do publicly. It is important to acknowledge and come to terms with this duality. At times, it seems that the film exists only “out there,” on the screen and in that original viewing experience. But a film is more than what happens while we are watching it together: the internal, personal consequences of viewing are important even if unacknowledged.

In our viewings of *Finding Nemo*, there are no real surprises but many expected and repeated pleasures. Gavin and I see the film together, but each of us has a personal experience, as well as the shared one. Part of my experience is watching him respond and sharing the ritual responses of anxiety, relief, and laughter with him. I delight in his pleasure. I see the film partly through his eyes and partly through the lens of my own childhood and that of my children.

**The Form and Style of Film Affect Its Spiritual Dimensions**

What happens to us spiritually when we watch a film? Scholars have acknowledged the social force of film to shape cultural identity but have said little about spirituality and film specifically. Before his career as a screenwriter and director, Paul Schrader described a process he felt could lead film viewers to a metaphysical experience. The primary force in generating this experience was form, rather than content. He emphasizes it is “film style” and not subject matter that creates a viewer’s transcendent spiritual experience through film. Thomas Lefler and Gideon Burton do an excellent job of describing and applying Schrader’s Transcendental style to Mormonism in a case study of the LDS Church’s *Legacy*, summarized in this issue of *BYU Studies*. They clearly identify the role of theology in the kind of transcendence possible for the spectator of *Legacy*.

Schrader’s work calls attention to the process, or form, of film, rather than its plot, or content. He emphasizes one dimension of considering how a film can work on us—how we work with a film, as well as what the film is about. He suggests that we carefully consider the way a film moves us
through a narrative, as well as the narrative itself. Thus, as I watch *Finding Nemo*, I must consider not just the narrative events, such as when Marlin and Dory escape from sharks, but how this scene fits into the bigger picture of how the film is working and the ways it encourages me to interact. How do I follow Marlin and Nemo? The form of *Finding Nemo* moves me as smoothly and buoyantly as a fish swims through a coral reef. Am I moved so quickly through the narrative that I lose myself in the fast-paced action? Do the characters disappear beneath overwhelming spectacle? In some films, we find that the mode of the film’s presentation of information can subvert the apparent intent of the content. Conventional filmmaking, whatever its subject and moral message, may give the story to us in an emotionally driven form, a sensationalistic ride through artificially pumped-up or manipulated emotions. Being led through shallow sentiment may conceal deeper, darker implications. A form that is shaped around easy solutions and quickly provoked emotions such as anger, blame, and pity may cheapen even the most worthwhile content. When we are caught up with a group in the moment of watching a film, we may simply accept and even justify decisions that rest on little more than easily evoked sentiments. The form of a film that includes manipulative music or use of lighting or opportunistic plot points can lead to simplistic results that the work (and we as viewers) may not warrant. When we are scrutinizing the content of films, we should also consider how they tell their worthy stories.

Family or children’s films are particularly prone to avoid complexities or to use the appeal of emotion or inane “comic relief” in their form, whatever their narrative content. But *Finding Nemo* presents a heart-tugging situation while resisting the temptation to provide easy solutions; it is artfully crafted, with repeated patterns of learning and problem solving; all advances toward a happy ending are earned by the work of the characters; the storyteller does not cheat by finding simplistic solutions. The film does not efface the difficulties of what the characters are doing. I share the work Marlin and Nemo do to find each other as they earn their rewards. The film successfully balances showing real difficulties with showing faith that difficulties can be changed.

**We Co-create Meanings in Film**

The film experience consists not only of our watching the film but of later reflecting on it personally and discussing it with others, in various contexts. It is in contemplating the experience of watching *Finding Nemo* that Dory’s lines become integrated with my efforts to move forward, spiritually as well as physically. Watching the film with Gavin is part of
what makes this movie interesting to me—how many films can repeatedly engage a three-year-old and his grandmother? But when I regard what the film *means*, it comes alive for me in other settings and dimensions.

In watching a film, we co-create meanings with the filmmakers; we actively make our own personal meaning out of the film experience. One difficulty with film is that we may not be aware that we are doing anything but passively sitting. We watch Nemo and Dory surrounded and actively engaged by visual experience and the happenings around them, but our role in actively co-creating the meanings is invisible to us.

Sometimes when we watch a film we disappear into it, losing ourselves in the created world. (That is the primary reason some people go to movies—to immerse themselves in something quite different from daily life.) But it is impossible to go into a film and emerge with nothing more than “relaxation” or distraction from our other concerns. We carry with us the values and experiences we have helped create during that viewing.

I have noticed that while watching *Finding Nemo* I co-create some parts of the film because they link to something I continue to struggle with in my ongoing spiritual progress: being hindered in moving forward by my anxieties and fears, which is a limitation of my faith I struggle with. Bringing that concern—and earnest efforts to improve—to the film, I am especially sensitive to the ways that characters in the film learn to take risks and learn to trust themselves and each other. Marlin has to leave the safety of the reef and discover he can trust Dory and that he can ingeniously help other people, too. Nemo negotiates new situations by helping others and by using what he learns in new ways. Dory has to trust that she can read—and remember. Asking why I respond—and create the film for myself—in certain intense ways can let me tease out the connections to the spiritual work I’m doing to better myself.

Phenomenology is the study of things as they are perceived, acknowledging the existence of phenomena in the world but arguing they don’t “exist” for us until we perceive them. In literary and film studies, phenomenology generally points to the space where the book’s or film’s content and the viewer’s reception (or perception) of it meet. Meaning lies in a shared space held by the spectator who connects with his or her own values as well as those of the creator through the experience of the book or film. Meaning is not found in the text or content alone. It is created “on the run” while watching the film as the viewer receives from the creator the threads of meaning embedded in the film and revives it by his or her own energy and intelligence.4

Just as Nemo and Marlin are traversing new experiences and learning about themselves, so our viewing of them can cause us to take our
own phenomenological journey. My perception of Nemo and Marlin is inevitably shaped by my own experiences as a parent, particularly those with a son who has loved to explore and take risks since he was a toddler. This experiencing of a film—making sense of it—is fundamentally phenomenological, in the sense that it is our perception of the film that we experience and retain. The only meanings of a film we have are those that we perceive, that we help create through our participation, even though we may not be aware of it. The filmmakers have created the light and shadows and the story that is on the screen, but it is only our responses and our intelligence that allow the film to have meaning for us.

This phenomenological operation of film parallels the regular phenomenology of other spiritual practices. For instance, Christ’s parables require a phenomenological response because the way they are presented requires our active participation (contemplation) to make them comprehensible and meaningful. Parables require us to understand what the story is about on the surface and then to actively determine what the hidden spiritual meanings are—and then to translate those into our lives. Religion requires us not only to directly watch or understand material intellectually and emotionally, but to reflect on what such material could mean to us in our personal struggles. We also practice a form of phenomenology as we read and reread scriptures or general conference addresses, seeing how our responses change as our life experiences allow us to see more deeply and differently. The same experience happens in church meetings when we consider the varying responses to lessons or church speakers from people who share a meeting with us: on some occasions certain people feel the spirit strongly, and sometimes others do. Every time we listen to a Gospel Doctrine lesson or sacrament meeting talk, we quickly, invisibly, and internally compare this new version or insight with what we already know or feel about it from prior experiences. We scan it against our prior interpretations or understandings, internalized and modified by repeated contemplations and exposures. We focus on what the scripture is saying to us now, how it is presented to us, what the motives and skills of the speaker or teacher are, and how what is being said is useful in our current efforts to improve. It is what we make of these messages that determines their spiritual efficacy in our lives.

As we actively co-create film, it calls us to ourselves. If I watch Finding Nemo without considering that I’m a creator of meaning, I might not learn what is possible about myself. Watching a film passively without awareness of our participation can mean that we only experience (and thus consider) events and people remotely, detached unless there is a visceral pull of sentiment or excitement. But the film process also means we can be
engaged empathetically with the characters and events on screen, and yet see them—and see ourselves experiencing them—from a distance.

Film scholar Vivian Sobchack values phenomenology as a way to “see” our personal seeing and begin to “know” the kinds of knowing we acquire as we view a film, as well as live life. It allows us vicarious experiences that expand our knowledge of others and can be used to deepen our understanding of ourselves: “Phenomenology calls us to a series of systematic reflections within which we question and clarify that which we intimately live, but which has been lost to our reflective knowledge through habituation and/or institutionalization.” We become so accustomed to the way we perceive ourselves that we don’t think about why we see ourselves a certain way.

The power (and danger) of film is its ability to “show” us experiences and feelings from the inside, as if we were somehow seeing through the eyes and hearts of the characters on screen. Film can let us watch “ourselves” (on screen), then watch ourselves watching ourselves and others, then contemplate our responses. Sobchack says film “transposes,” or translates, the “invisible, individual,” internal, and personal privacy of our direct experience into a “visible, public” and shared “sociality of a language” that is spoken when we watch a film. The watching is powerful partly because it is embodied or embedded in a person and in a dramatic context: Sobchack says film is a form of “direct embodied experience.”

Film condenses time and intensifies emotions. It lets us be simultaneously inside an experience on the screen and outside it reflecting on what we are doing and seeing. This means when I’m watching Finding Nemo I am Marlin and his son; I struggle to find independence as Nemo while I’m also Marlin endeavoring to protect his son. I can be Dory, too, trying to help my dear friend, and simultaneously be Marlin, filled with irritation at her flakiness. I can also see myself watching these characters and gain insight into how and why I look at film and at life. My viewing (and reviewing of some films) can lead me to see certain patterns of feeling—like a knot in an otherwise smooth thread that calls attention to something I need to work on.

Thus, as viewers watching or remembering a film, we see in multiple levels: the characters from outside, the characters’ points of view from inside (emotionally and some times literally), the worldview created by the filmmaker, and—through reflection—we can see ourselves seeing. Understanding how we customarily view the world is important, but it is knowledge hard to come by. Film offers opportunities to get that knowledge. It can feel safe to first understand how we view the Nemo-Marlin relationship and other examples we see on the screen, but then we can turn to the
more complicated task of understanding how we view our own familial relationships. The act of constituting film requires active participation from creator and from viewer; the shared “visions” thus created are uniquely collective. But for us these visions depend on what we bring to its “making” through our active viewing.

**Film Offers Meaningful Vicarious Experience**

Film’s vicarious experiences, which cover a broad range of lifestyles, are intensified by their presentation in a dramatic form. Film can offer training experiences, a way of acting out others’ life experience and soul states that may give us insight, from the inside out. And since the experience is provisional, we gain understanding while fully inhabiting it (for good or ill). Viewers actively engage with the vicarious experiences a film offers, satisfying a desire for conflict and resolution, for endangerment as well as reassurance or joy. For example, we feel physical tension and then relief when Marlin saves Dory from the jellyfish. Not only are they (as am I) safe, but Marlin (and I) have overcome our fear of danger and ingeniously devised a game to rescue a friend. We see ourselves in various characters and in the narrator presenting them, identifying with their qualities, dilemmas, habits, and problem-solving skills as they work through fundamental processes of living: maturation, loss, seeking, and moving out of their comfort zones.

From Dory we learn to keep trying (she struggles with her lack of short-term memory) and to seek help in unusual places. When she gets assistance from some apparent enemies such as sharks and a whale, we see that creatures quite different from ourselves may be able to help us do important things, and that, in fact, there is no way to successfully navigate life without help from these surprising sources. From Marlin we learn to listen to and trust others and to lighten up—not to take life so seriously. (He demonstrates his new skill when he’s finally able to tell a joke, like a “real” clownfish.) The principle of taking necessary risks and venturing into new areas is juxtaposed with the necessity and value of a group working together. The film uses aquatic life to affirm that working with others is crucial and that lots of help is available.

Through watching *Finding Nemo*, I am led to examine my inclinations to control or save others or my tendency to hedge myself in lest something bad happen. For Gavin, I hope that adopting multiple perspectives through the eyes of characters creates a pattern of seeing how people with viewpoints he doesn’t agree with arrive at their perspectives, and thus give him a resistance to monocular vision. Practicing seeing other people’s
perspectives without adopting them can generate understanding, which for Gavin might help when another toddler insists on building a tower of blocks in a different way. Reflecting on a film allows us to see our points of resistance to certain kinds of people and consider altering our judgments of them: can I possibly judge a forgetful or annoying neighbor the same way after my experience with Dory?

The Narrator Guides Us through Film

In addition to offering us a kind of identification with characters, film provides us with a “narrator-in-the-text” who shows us all of the action and all of the characters. This narrator is usually not overtly heard or seen, but rather it is the controlling presence of the filmmaker who tells the story. This narrator creates and interprets the narrative and then leads us through it in a certain way. Nick Browne has discussed the ways that cinematically telling a story connects the spectator to more than the characters within the film’s story. In a 1975 essay, “The Spectator in the Text: The Rhetoric of Stagecoach,” Browne analyzes a single scene from John Ford’s 1939 film to demonstrate how the narrator-in-the-text imperceptibly interprets the interaction among characters and the film’s values. The way the story is told also contains interpretation of values, and the viewer is invited by the invisible narrator/director to have certain feelings about and attitudes toward different characters in the film.

In Finding Nemo, we sympathize with Marlin and find the unspeaking jellyfish to be eerie and dangerous because of the way the invisible narrator has presented them within the story’s values, which in film typically promote the goals of the protagonist. Finding Nemo’s narrator walks the fine line of letting me experience fear without being overwhelmed by it. The movie’s makers are trustworthy because they are honest: they are not interested in playing with emotions or tricking viewers or demonstrating how clever they are.

Browne’s model provides a way to talk about film narratives that contain elements or characters that we may not agree with or admire. A simple instance of this is the singing of “Hakuna Matata” by Pumba and Timon in The Lion King. Pumba is a warthog and Timon is a meerkat that the young Simba meets after leaving his pride, as he tries to find himself while separated from all that is familiar. His new friends urge him to relax and take life as it comes: “No worries,” they sing, and they demonstrate the pleasures of such a lifestyle. I believe the narrator-in-the-text of The Lion King wants us to find their song charming but also to be aware that Timon and Pumba are immature, trying to find their way through the jungle of life. Their philosophy works for them at this point, and they provide
comfort and companionship to the lonely and confused Simba. But the film is not advocating this philosophy as a choice for leading one’s life. The narrator-in-the-text does not expect or wish viewers to embrace the attitude permanently and indeed will show us how the three characters in this scene grow and make different choices as the plot unfolds. The narrator of The Lion King allows us to enjoy and identify with a philosophy (and characters) that are a part of the movie but certainly not its whole. In The Lion King, the protagonist himself is going through stages and at some points makes poor decisions or lacks sufficient information to do the right thing. The narrator-in-the-text holds us at some remove from Simba—we know before he does what his destiny is, that his calling is to remember who he is and return to his home and assume leadership.

Who does Finding Nemo ask us to be? Through the narrator, we relate to Marlin’s desire to protect his son—a desire intensified by the pain of losing his wife and other children—and are irked by the interference of the absent-minded Dory; to Dory herself, who wants to help but is haunted by her poor memory; to Nemo as he struggles with his “little fin” and anxiety about being on his own; to Crush, the relaxed sea turtle whose trust in his family is a quite different model of parenting; and to Gil, the elder statesman of the aquarium with world-worn weariness and nobility. The narrator sees life steadily and sees it whole, without flinching at the difficult parts. He is not foolishly optimistic, but he has faith in the desire and capacity of individuals to improve themselves. The narrator seamlessly carries us from the sea to the aquarium and dentist’s office in Sydney, maintaining the suspense about how the two plotlines will reconnect. The story is told with a sense of its absurdity and a sweet belief that difficult goals certainly are possible, sort of like Dory’s resilient faith in her ability to “talk whale” or remember the dentist’s address from his swim mask. The characters are flawed but worthy of admiration. A repeated message runs through the film: the need for and difficulty of trusting yourself. It gently insists, “If you’re focused on only what you want or what you fear, you’ll never see what is possible.”

Film Can Enlarge Our Souls When We Watch Charitably

Because of the inherent vicarious experiencing that is intrinsically part of viewing, film includes a strong moral dimension. Films forcefully show values in action and in conflict. Values are portrayed dramatically and subjectively, and we can choose to resist them even as we provisionally accept them for the duration of the film. Because we do contribute to the “making” of the films that we watch, film watching provides opportunities
to understand the nuances of our value-making system and to evaluate the worldviews of the filmmakers and characters.

C. S. Lewis commented on the power of seeing through the eyes of others in his exploration of new ways to approach a literary text, *An Experiment in Criticism*. He asks us to consider what kinds of pleasure texts offer us and how the text itself invites us to approach it. Considering possible benefits of reading (and viewing, by implication), he is interested in how books (films) can open not just the world of literature (film), but also the lives of others—from the interior. Lewis suggests that the act of reading (viewing) is doubly paradoxical: it takes us into and out of ourselves; it may divert us, but it can also be a way we grow: “We seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. . . . We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own.”

Feeling with other hearts is one kind of vicarious experience, one of the ways we may heal ourselves. As we feel with Nemo’s heart when he forgives his father’s overprotectiveness, we may learn to forgive ourselves and others. We feel with Marlin’s heart as he steps back and lets his son take a risk and endanger himself in order to save hundreds of other fish. C. S. Lewis sees the multiplicity of perspectives (experiencing through other eyes, other imaginations, other hearts) as allowing for moving beyond our human limitations, while retaining our distinctly individual identity: “But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here [in reading], as in worship, in love, in moral action and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”

Lewis believes that good reading has something in common with what he calls “affectional or moral or intellectual activity.” These combinations of the emotional, spiritual, and logical in our reading puts a much larger burden on us than if we approach a text with any one of the three. Simply opening ourselves to emotions proffered by any film we feel is “appropriate” is not enough; intellectually analyzing a film, or simply trusting its moral approach (however wholesome it may appear) is not enough. He encourages our responding to the text in the manner or tone the film asks us to and then to evaluate that experience, particularly regarding our share in the creation of meaning. Some of the responsibility for what happens as we view a film thus depends on us; we do not escape ourselves when we enter into the narrative of a book or a movie.

This consideration of the intents of a film’s creators and implications for viewers is echoed in Dean Duncan’s concept of “charitable cinema.”
His approach takes into consideration the inclination of the creators toward the material being filmed and toward the viewers. Such inclinations can increase or diminish the moral dimensions of a particular film; even a cleverly crafted, highly polished film is not generous or helpful to viewers if it is manipulative or mean-spirited—for example, *Finding Nemo* would lose some of its power if it took a mean-spirited, condemning approach to the dentist rather than a charitable one.

Charitable cinema operates for the reception as well as the creation of film. If we approach a work like *Finding Nemo* with contempt or laziness or cynicism, its full moral nature will be inaccessible to us. One way we enhance and control our ethical experiences with film is to reflect on our negative responses or reluctance to engage with a work that has no overt offensive intent. One such experience for me was watching *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, a film about three aboriginal girls. In the film, a white government official, Neville, feels called upon to take care of the girls as he believes is best, but he fails to see his own limitations and rigidity. I hated this arrogant character and found myself being smug in that judgment. Later I reflected on my own tendency to sometimes be self-righteous and impose judgments on others, and I realized that that was the source of my smugness. I was avoiding dealing with my own difficult complexities.

Seeing the acts and choices of others from inside the characters or through a sympathetic narrator’s eyes can increase our understanding of the choices of others. Film offers the additional moral dimension of seeing not only the reasons people make certain judgments and choices, but the consequences of these choices (which we may not otherwise have considered).

What are the moral processes and values implied by *Finding Nemo*? How do the makers of *Finding Nemo* extend themselves to me and to Gavin? What do the narrator and the characters encourage us to believe is needful? I feel Gavin and I can trust the film. My need to resist any particular viewpoint or the attitude of its creators is less in this film than in others for several reasons. The behaviors and attitudes enacted in the film avoid the snares of films I see as problematic (particularly the behaviors found in many movies designed for “family” audiences that are in fact vulgar). The varieties of humor in *Finding Nemo* are not crude or mocking; the failings of all characters are acknowledged but not condemned or viewed with an indulgent eye (of the “boys will be boys” school that tolerates certain misbehaviors as inherent in human nature); the sources of conflicts and the nature of virtue are realistically human (ironically, given its cast of aquatic characters); no quick fixes or facile emotional resolutions are offered; the dramatic conflicts are external disasters caused by natural forces.
I would like Gavin to know that life can be difficult for everyone, parents as well as children, sharks as well as clownfish. And that there are ways to negotiate difficulties that are rewarding. *Finding Nemo* seems to fit the worldview Gavin can develop and enacts it without preaching. (I realize that the version of the film that Gavin and I share is phenomenologically different from the precise one experienced by other viewers and that it is dangerous to impose grandiose significance on light entertainment. It would be further revealing if Gavin could have an adult conversation regarding his engagement with the film—but that will have to wait for another time and perhaps another film.)

**Film Expresses Values We Can Accept or Reject**

When we view a film, we temporarily enter a space or reality other than our own, a world composed of often differing views and values wherein the viewer must navigate and make value judgments for or against narratives, characters, and their underlying values. Even if I do not agree with the values of a particular film, I still find myself considering them for a two-hour duration, accepting the film’s sights (and insights) as I share its world of experience and knowledge.

Recognition of the various kinds of values—and their possible attractiveness to us—is part of the needful reflection on films we experience.

In a discussion of experiencing theater, Rick Duerden of BYU’s English Department said, “You are not implicated in what you see.” He cites Brigham Young: “It is your duty to study to know everything upon the face of the earth, in addition to reading those books [the scriptures]. We should study not only good, and its effects upon our race, but evil, and its consequences.” One available way we’ve learned to “study not only good, . . . but evil” and the consequences of both is by reading literature and by thinking, talking, and writing about it. Brigham Young continued: “I intend to know the whole of it, both good and bad. Shall I practise evil? No; neither have I told you to practise it, but to learn by the light of truth every principle there is in existence in the world.” The analysis of evil is not evil; on the contrary, it is part of the battle against evil. And understanding our own feelings and responses is part of developing healthy attitudes about whatever issues we try to discuss in the light of the gospel.

We can recognize our compliance with the invitation of the implied author or narrator in the text, as Wayne Booth and C. S. Lewis suggest. An additional step is to see but choose to resist the invitations of a film text. African American film theorist Manthia Diawara talks about these possibilities in “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and
Resistance.” He examines the roles of the black viewer in particular and a “resisting spectator” in general. His model can apply to reading a text “against the grain” of the creators’ conscious or unconscious intentions. He argues that a spectator can interpret (or even contradict) the intentions of a film’s creators as revealed by watching the film. (For example, even if the intentions of the filmmakers of *The Lion King* were to promote a philosophy of “no worries,” I would still feel comfortable viewing the film with Gavin, because as viewers we could interpret these intentions in the context of the film, accept or contradict what the filmmakers may be saying, and gain morally from the process.) Diawara is concerned about those who see equivalence between what is on the screen and what the spectator gets from the film.16

This type of resistance may be useful for understanding our responses to a film, particularly to one that generates a mixture of responses. We may find ourselves drawn to certain points of view or values expressed in a film, but want to reject (or resist) others. And sometimes a film is particularly important to us spiritually if it allows us to become aware of sticking points—places where we have work to do, but we don’t quite know precisely what the problem (or solution) is.

Watching and thinking about my responses to *Rabbit-Proof Fence* clarified another issue for me. At one point, the government official presents his plan, and I bristle at his unqualified, unquestioned, arrogant tone telling others exactly what is what. He will resort to emotional blackmail because he has to get the “right thing” done, and if in the process he violates the choice-making abilities of a “less evolved” creature, he sees that as certainly justifiable. One thing the film offers me is the chance to be angry with those who restrain people (children, female children in this case) “for their own good.” And my reaction to this character helps me see how I resent the times self-righteous people have stopped me from doing things because they felt I did not know enough. They may have been right, but could they not have extended their prohibitions with kindness and respect? That leads me to consider my own manner and “heart” when I am constrained to “correct” others myself.

Diawara’s account of the resistant spectator suggests important ways to reflect on our responses to film. As spectators watching a text, especially a text with which we have an intense or prolonged relationship, we can understand where a film raises points we can’t otherwise see clearly, if at all. Films may resonate with some important aspect of our development that we are barely aware of. Sometimes our attachment to film goes beyond love of a particular story or character; often the patterning of the film’s structure and stitching together of thematic elements is more appealing
and revealing. Diawara shows that we are not monolithic or single-minded in our engagement with film. While we may recognize the power of an aspect of a film that persuades us to hold a certain view of others, we are also fully capable of refusing to go along with that inclination. Recognizing what the film wants us to do as well as our resistance or inclination to it is key to a greater understanding of ourselves.

In *Finding Nemo*, there does not seem to be any display or message I want to resist; these are characters and values Gavin and I can learn from and model.

**Reflecting on Film Can Be Transformative**

For me, a cinematic reflection (or a reflection on cinema) is useful as a regular part of my efforts to understand myself. Consideration of the images we receive and create as we watch allows us to look inward, as well as forward and outward, with an eye of faith. What we “see” in movies registers in our souls and, to a degree, is created by and from our spirit. Film watching means looking at a projected image, but it also means looking at a psychological and spiritual projection of personal truth—or at least of our understanding of the truth. Film transforms our experiences on the level and in the form that can be accessible if we viewers take it seriously and engage it. The process can be transformative in the lives of those who watch, but it requires thoughtful consideration. We need to develop awareness of our individual process of watching and internalizing ideas that may or may not be true. Such reflection requires that we consider how we personally create meanings from film viewing and that we then spend time and energy considering what that creative process means in terms of who we are and who we hope to become. It also means regarding the films that are etched in our memory (perhaps through countless viewings, such as with *Finding Nemo*, or through a particularly poignant single viewing) and what role they may play in the way we perceive ourselves and others.

Understanding how we have (often unconsciously) acquired knowledge through film allows us to intensify the usefulness of the film-viewing experience. We can use film self-reflectively—as part of our consideration of who we are, who we would like to be, and what may be blocking us. Most of us have had the experience of standing in a space between two large mirrors that create a myriad of reflections, where we see ourselves again and again and again. A cinematic reflection may function as a kind of double mirror that replicates us in a manner that lets us see not only what we are but also what we might become. Contemplating our film viewing can give insight into our own behavior; it may be particularly helpful
in allowing us to see dimensions of ourselves that we rarely see, just as one sees the back of one’s head in the mirror.

Thinking about a film that stays with me in some way is a means of understanding something that I sense is important but that I cannot quite yet “see.” Such a process is a sort of reframing of an experience that I marked as meaningful at the time but did not grasp the significance of. Looking later, from a distance, at the encounter I had with the film lets the most relevant features emerge. Sometimes the relevant features are about what I need to do myself; sometimes they are about the needs and motives of other people I’m dealing with, professionally and personally. At first glance, for me, *Finding Nemo* is about the importance of a parent letting go of a child. But I came to realize that the further message is to find a way to stay connected to the independent person who is my offspring. On the surface, Nemo wants to find his way back home to the coral reef. But parallel-ling that, on a deeper level, he wants to be respected and trusted by his father and function autonomously, trusting himself.

There are other points that I “see” when the film gently mirrors and mocks some aspects of my nature I would like to change. There is a fish so obsessed with bubbles he can think of nothing else when they appear and a cleaning shrimp who withdraws from all around him unless there is a specific task available that he can do well. He emerges only to do his task—never for anything else. A long-spined porcupine fish who inflates when he feels the slightest bit of fear or anger lets me see clearly how those emotions may prevent someone from taking any action at all. Even the sharks who are struggling (mostly unsuccessfully) with their addiction to eating fish let me recognize and even laugh at the struggle to resist eating things I know are not good for me. I did not consciously register these meanings until after several viewings; these meanings emerged (perhaps uniquely for me) because of the areas of concern I already had about my inner life and outward actions.

**Conclusion**

Because we do contribute to the “making” of the films that we watch, film watching provides opportunities to understand the nuances of our value-making system and to evaluate the values of the filmmakers and characters. Reflecting on film can work in conjunction with other spiritual efforts, helping us see how God can operate in our lives and helping us better understand other people’s motives and possible reasons behind their actions and words. Reflection and discussion can help us understand what films mean to others and which values they attach. Reflection can help us
identify which factors are shaping our negative responses to certain people and experiences. This reflection is intimately related to our spiritual growth.

Our regular practices of reading scriptures, pondering them, and thinking about how they relate to our everyday life can apply to other experiences, if we reflect on them. Joseph F. Smith described the circumstances in which he received a revelation on life after death. “I sat in my room pondering over the scriptures; and reflecting upon the great atoning sacrifice. . . . As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened” (D&C 138:1, 11). Pondering the results of our film viewing can become part of our seeking truth; it can be a tool to add to those understandings by which we grow. While film does not have the intensity of truth found in the scriptures, it can offer us help in “laying the foundation of a great work” in our spiritual development: “out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33). Faith can operate as effectively when we contemplate some films as when we consider words from the best books.

When we ponder film in retrospect, we see all of its multiple levels: intellectually (rationally), emotionally, and spiritually. The “text” each of us creates in watching a film is unique to us: no one else adds the particular feelings, ideas, and spiritual nuances that arise from our distinctive life experiences. And if we view the same film again, we create a different text, in that our perceptions are colored by the prior viewing. Even if I were to watch Finding Nemo without my grandson, my experience of it, although new, would be influenced by the many times we have watched it together.

One complication of bringing film into consideration is that film, like much religious experience, is ineffable, difficult to put clearly into words; its visual storytelling form engages us in nonverbal ways. Our ponderings are also very private, intimately tied to the core of our eternal identities, so they are hard to articulate and difficult to share. We make ourselves vulnerable by focusing on our own memories of film viewing. Often we are drawn toward specific aspects or kinds of film because something in them attracts us or, even more importantly, because something there may trouble us. Reflecting about these films’ relation to our inner lives may be very useful in our struggles to know ourselves, but it is also extremely difficult to do.

The film experience is not restricted to the theater but continues on as we reflect and internalize and use what the film has given us the opportunity to experience. We bring it out from the darkened room into the light of our daily lives.
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1. On film’s spiritual potential, see Paul Schrader, The Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer (New York: De Capo, 1972).


3. Schrader, Transcendental Style in Film.

4. Film scholar Dudley Andrew is interested in how meaning is made while someone views a film. He calls it “reason on the run,” because the meanings (reason) of the film emerge only in the action of perceiving. Andrew reconsiders the role the spectator plays in construction of meaning. He develops a nonrational, experiential approach that urges attending to connections between viewers’ “real lives” and the films they watch, rather than only logical, scholarly analysis: “Life itself tells us that experience is dearer and more trustworthy than schemes by which we seek to know and change it.” He values the way a viewer’s co-creating of a film moves the experience off the screen or outside a detached intellectual analysis and into our lives. Dudley Andrew, “Phenomenology: The Neglected Tradition” (1978), in Movies and Methods: An Anthology, ed. Bill Nichols, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 628–31.

5. Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 28. Sobchack is interested in the operation of a certain kind of “vision”—of how as spectators our eye “addresses” the film and the eyes of characters within the film’s narrative diegesis (fictional world), and how film creators share their vision and their perceptions with others through the film’s narrative presentation. She uses Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology to propose ways of seeing both film and our experiences differently: “The radical reflection of phenomenology attempts to reanimate the taken-for-granted and the institutionally sedimented” (28).


7. Nick Browne, “The Spectator in the Text: The Rhetoric of Stagecoach,” in Film Theory and Criticism, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118–34. Browne’s argument is that the creator(s) of the text uses “presentational structures” or spatial/temporal structures (such as camera angle, lighting, music, composition and art direction, acting, editing, plot, and dialogue) to create a position (within the text) from which the spectator views the action and understands the themes of the film. The narrator (director John Ford, in the specific case Browne analyzes) compels the spectator to join him in a certain relationship not only to characters but also to the main beliefs (moral order) of the narrative.


9. Lewis, Experiment in Criticism, 141.

10. Lewis, Experiment in Criticism, 138.
11. Dean Duncan, lecture notes in possession of the author.

12. Nick Browne’s “narrator-in-the-text” charitable cinema echoes the view of Wayne Booth as articulated in The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction. Booth’s exploration of how reading (and reflecting on our reading) is ethical is closely allied to the role of active spectator and implied narrator. He identifies the kinds of “implied authors” that guide us, describing their attitudes toward us, as well as toward the people in their narratives. He believes that the relationship the narrator-in-the-text has with us is as important as the theme or the values of the characters within the story the narrator tells. The author’s “disposition” is revealed by the kind of fictional world he creates and how he leads us through it, as well as the characters who share their experiences. “Its time takes over our time. And we are occupied in the sense of being taken over, colonized: occupied by a foreign imaginary world.” There are benefits as well as dangers to sharing a fictional world and its values. Wayne Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 139.

13. Rick Duerden, “How to Experience the Theater as a Student of Theater,” 1, copy of manuscript in possession of the author.


15. Booth, Company We Keep.

16. Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” in Film Theory and Criticism, 893, 898–900. Diawara feels resistant spectatorship can help generate different kinds of film as well as different types of viewing in relationship to depiction of people and cultures on screen. In addition to withstanding the images or values presented, he says, “Resisting spectators are transforming the problem of passive identification into active criticism which both informs and interrelates with contemporary oppositional film-making.” He believes independent black productions have “sharpened the Afro-American spectator’s critical attitude towards Hollywood films” (900). This calls attention to the importance (and sometimes, the difficulty) of our role as “active” viewers and the issue of the currently emerging Mormon film movement.

Developments in Mormon cinema in the last few years have taken place not only with popular narrative feature films intended for theatrical exhibition. Independently produced documentary film, which actually has a stronger tradition within Mormonism, has also been growing. One group, a coalition of Brigham Young University faculty and students and independent filmmakers led by Dean Duncan of BYU’s Theatre and Media Arts Department, has been creating a series of documentary films entitled “Fit for the Kingdom.”

On February 12, 2002, the Fit for the Kingdom group submitted the following funding proposal to BYU’s Media Projects Committee. This formative document spells out a vision for film firmly grounded in LDS values and doctrine but in a style sharply differing from most Mormon filmmaking, including the more prominent theatrical films that were emerging at the same time. Rather than follow Hollywood mores and narrative practices, Duncan and his coalition innovatively advocate using consumer-level video equipment to create short documentaries that profile rank-and-file members of the Church. The films are intended to emphasize discipleship and hence favor characterization over narrative. Still, rather than formally bearing their testimonies, the subjects generally exhibit their discipleship through regular activities within their daily surroundings.

Duncan’s funding proposal, because it can be seen as a type of manifesto, is appropriately written in a tone of religious and artistic idealism, which in itself speaks to the seriousness with which some Latter-day Saints are attempting to reorient contemporary Mormon filmmaking. The tradition of writing film manifestos started in the earliest years of cinema and continues to the present. Filmmakers typically describe their political,
artistic, or philosophical agenda using visionary terms; very often, these strong ideological positions have resulted in strong aesthetic traditions that have influenced the course of global cinema. The ideologically charged writings of John Grierson, Sergei Eisenstein, and the Cahiers du Cinema critics of the 1950s thus charted the course of documentary film, revolutionary Soviet cinema, and the French New Wave, respectively. More formal manifestos include Dziga Vertov’s 1929 work describing how film’s capabilities could provide the impetus for communism, the 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto, in which twenty-six young German filmmakers proclaimed the principles that led to the New German Cinema, and the Dogme 95 manifesto (1995), which insisted upon the use of low production values to counterbalance the cultural dominance of high-budget films. Other examples are legion.

As in these examples, Duncan attempts to reestablish Mormon film on an ideological plane. Though his main influences, enumerated in the document’s full-length version, come from world cinema, Mormonism itself provides numerous precedents for the Fit for the Kingdom films. In addition to Latter-day Saints’ ubiquitous journals and family histories, numerous films and literary efforts have sought to extol the faith of rank-and-file Latter-day Saints across the globe.

At this writing, multiple films in the Fit for the Kingdom series have been completed, filmed in various regions in the United States and Colonia Juarez in northern Mexico. Although the filmmakers have not received any substantial funding or widespread distribution, they have continued to work on their own terms, without significant budgets, aiming more for authenticity and fidelity to their founding principles than for publicity. At present, thirteen films are available, free for viewing, at http://fitforthekingdom.byu.edu.

The following document has been edited for space and clarity. The original included more scriptural quotations, an audience analysis, a distribution plan, and a list of authors and filmmakers who inspired this project. For a copy of the full text, email byu_studies@byu.edu.

Dean Duncan’s Project Proposal

To the Members of the Media Projects Committee,

Please find enclosed a project proposal that we hope you will support. In addition to outlining some of the practicalities and stylistic possibilities of our project, this declaration suggests something of our depth of feeling and conviction, as it relates to the documentary form in general, and to these films in particular. It is the sum of much thought and study and activity, the distillation of many years of teaching documentary and discussion about it. There is much here of zeal and assurance. We have a sense of calling that rather leaps off the page. These sentiments are without a doubt presumptuous. We also believe they are fairly justified. Anyway, in these few pages we stand fully revealed.

In our (church) media, we find much broadcast sensibility, much that is derived from advertising, much that aspires toward Hollywood. What we don’t generally find is this—documentary. This is a type of film that is complicated, contrary, often pulpit-pounding, and it seeks to go about doing good.

**Fit for the Kingdom: Lives of the Latter-day Saints**

This series is designed to illustrate and accomplish what we take to be the primary aims and obligations of the documentary film. These are as follows:

A. To portray and appreciate ordinary people in their ordinary circumstances, to the end that we do not mistake fantasy for reality, celebrity for substance, escapism for anxious engagement; to affirm that in enduring to the end and embracing the everyday we will find the key to and see the patterns of our improvement and exaltation.

B. To lift up the hands that hang down and strengthen the feeble knees, to ensure that the seats and centers of power provide means through which the silent can speak and the obscure can be acknowledged; to create through such exchanges the compassion, the conscience, and the humility that counter pride and leaven privilege, that the teacher may learn and the learner may teach, that equality and mutual edification may be our aim and our ultimate accomplishment.

C. Though our concentration on everyday lives will sometimes seem only to prove that man is born to trouble, and though our best attempts to succor or share will often founder or even fail, documentary demonstrates that tribulation is a blessed lot, because it is only in passing through it that we find transcendence.
Modern broadcast culture is inclined to celebrate counterfeit substance and compromised virtue. For our part, we wish to resist exaggeration in what we say and avoid compulsory means in the way we say it. We wish to look for quiet, exemplary Latter-day Saint lives and to document them in the most direct and unadorned fashion that we can.

Documentary consists of more than just the subjects that serve and bring to pass the aims that we have enumerated above. As with any other communication, the classic documentary brings message and manner together; the way that the idea is presented is inextricably linked with, and should be supportive of, the idea itself. Although the nonfiction film is as diverse as can be imagined, for our purposes we propose a more restricted stylistic palate, one that is in harmony with the subjects we are contemplating. The scriptures provide prescription for our own artistic practice (see also Eph. 4:1–2; Isa. 53:1–2; D&C 42:40–41; Rom. 12:8; Mark 4:37, 39).

Let all things be done decently and in order. (1 Cor. 14:40)

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. (1 Cor. 1:26–27)

But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. (1 Cor. 12:18, 21–22, 26)

Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matt. 6:26–29)

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

In our society’s media production, it has often been our impulse to sound the brass and tinkle the cymbal and spend the money, betraying in our excess a lack of confidence both in our audiences and in our message,
or perhaps even an estrangement from that message. It should not be thus; a true lily need not be gilded, though without the glitter the insensitive, or those starved for more honest representations, may miss its beauty. We can change this. Consider how George Eliot appreciates a person who has no celebrity but who has quiet, important influence upon others in her everyday life:

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature . . . spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.\textsuperscript{7}

With our proposed documentary visits, as those who fear the Lord speak quietly with us, we listen to them and look to see extraordinary ordinariness, to feel the weight of voices too often deemed peripheral, to find trials that distill into the transcendent. As we meet Latter-day Saints from every location and of every circumstance and description, we will learn of the loveliness to be found in simply doing your best, the satisfactions contained in unheralded discipleship. There will be dramatic stories, but in addition to relating these, we will also seek to do something less conventional and, finally, more profound. We wish to reveal. Instead of the \textit{becoming} that is prerequisite to conventional narrative, we seek subjects that demonstrate righteous \textit{being}. These will show us the diversity that makes us interesting and the common ground that will circumscribe difference into one mind, one heart, and one great whole.

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (Gal. 6:9)

We are inspired by the attention to and celebration of everyday lives, and of the everyday processes that make them up, found in the work of documentary pioneers such as Louis and Auguste Lumière, Robert Flaherty, and Dziga Vertov. We join with documentary codifier John Grierson in espousing the creative treatment of actuality, in affirming the prime importance of the worker—in this case the worker in the kingdom. We also remember Grierson’s institutionalization of these ideas in publicly funded organizations that were not beholden to profit motives, not answerable to philistine sponsorship. We are mindful that these organizations were able to provide alternatives to mammon, that they supplied

long-term leadership and succor and consolation, as well as the continuous representation of virtuous subjects to the education and edification of all.

The invention of more mobile film equipment during World War II made it possible to move away from commentary-heavy propaganda toward a more personal style, a style more sensitive to individual voices and intimate subjects. While some film forms became increasingly hardened and commercialized, documentary continued to evolve along these more human lines. We remember Direct Cinema, the Verité revolution, the Challenge for Change, the advent of digital equipment, and the decentralization of media power.

If there hasn't been much LDS documentary, this is not to say that the documentary idea is absent from our culture. Family history activities of various stripes all partake. We’re basically seeking to make home movies and to remove the pejorative associations that the term “home movies” summons—the difference being that our steeping in documentary history, as well as our access to slightly more sophisticated equipment, should allow us to make these programs just a little bit smoother and more polished.

The familiar devices of industrial storytelling and network journalism, the conventions of advertising and arm-twisting propaganda, all are fueled by the notion of concision. There must be no long conversations, no real reasoning together. Chases must be cut to, superfluities eliminated. This is also one of the tenets of escapism (making occasional respites from daily difficulties into a life's philosophy), which will not allow any distractions from the goal of narrative consummation and ticket taking. We like a lean story as much as anyone, but we regret that citizen discourse has been so thoroughly colonized by the imperatives of the entertainment industry.

Conversely, the classic documentary—like education, maturation, sanctification, and anything else that is worthy of our time—replaces this concision with the idea of duration. It’s a simple notion, familiar and true. Good things take a little bit of time, and the more time given, the greater the reward. Fast foods, fast fixes, fast bucks may all have their place, but their cumulative effect, their near monopolistic hold on our habits, is plain dangerous.

This is our position. While allowing for the fact that people may be in a hurry and that sensitive selection and direction can be helpful for the beleaguered in our modern day, we have a conviction that some slowing down is needed, some rose smelling, some improving of the shining moment.

There are two kinds of travel. The usual way is to take the fastest imaginable conveyance along the shortest road. The other way is not to care
particularly where you are going or how long it will take you, or whether
you will get there or not. These two methods of travel are perhaps easiest
to be seen by watching hunting hounds. One hound will follow his nose
directly to his prey. Another will follow his nose in a roundabout way
to molehills, empty rabbit holes, garbage cans, and trees; and perhaps
not pay any attention to his prey even when he happens upon it. This
second way of getting around has always been pointed out as the nic-
est for, as you can see in the case of the slower hunting hound, you are
able to see more of what is going on in the world and also how nature
is getting along.\textsuperscript{8}

This, and more besides, is what we hope to accomplish with our documen-
tary visits.

Sincere humans, with a modicum of technical proficiency, can speak
from their hearts to issues of common concern and conviction, and they’ll
be heard. But we know that you have to think about audiences, and about
justifying investments. We’re aiming at the entire LDS community. These
programs, and lots of them, should be on BYU TV. We think that Mor-
mons would, should, and will love to see and learn about and come to love
one another through programs like these.

We propose a series of short, three- to fifteen-minute documen-
taries, shot and edited digitally, combined and packaged by theme (or
by contrast) in sets of about a half hour each. We find people in their
own settings, at their own work or play, and by following and by gentle,
appreciative prodding, get them to tell us about themselves. There will be
observation of people’s processes. There will be some informal interview-
ing, mostly while the garden’s being dug or the driveway shoveled. There
will be simplicity and directness. And the message? Through all this we
expect that testimonies will be borne, and strengthened, but they won’t
be scripted or scored. They may not even be explicitly articulated; we
certainly won’t be asking for them. The hope, and the expectation, is that
decency will out, and that we’ll thrill to see the unforced saintliness in the
lives of our brothers and sisters.

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\hspace{1em}Gideon O. Burton (gideon_burton@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of
English at Brigham Young University and serves as chair of the BYU Studies Arts
and Sciences Board.

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Media Arts at Brigham Young University.
Legacy (1993) represents a high point in Church films imitating Hollywood moviemaking but departs from conventional films by not maintaining its focus on the main character. The fate of Eliza Morley (Kathleen Beller) is swallowed up in the drama of the early Mormons. A possible LDS film style emerges as viewers are led to identify not with a protagonist but with the body of striving believers and their united onward progress. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic
Film Styles in *Legacy*

Thomas J. Lefler and Gideon O. Burton

Latter-day Saints aspire to movies that enhance, rather than undermine, their spiritual lives and that respect their religious convictions. However, discussion among Mormons about film tends to focus primarily on content—the presence of inappropriate content or the desire for more family-friendly subjects. Mormons are not alone in looking to film as a way of powerfully presenting religious themes and ideas. Biblical films, for example, have been a staple from the beginning of motion pictures. However, a film’s content is not its only religious dimension. Many films that portray ostensibly religious subjects, argues film theorist Michael Bird, “have too often erred precisely in their disregard for the medium’s stylistic virtues.” What is required in “a cinematic theology,” he contends, “is a consideration of how the style of film can enable an exploration of the sacred.” Bird echoes Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who has been similarly critical of art having religious content but rendered in a nonreligious style. Like other arts, film is not simply a medium for a message; a movie’s form is essential to what it is and what it does.

Films draw us into imaginative worlds (fictional or otherwise), and they offer us an experience “that either confirms, challenges, or transforms the world of our own construction.” Whether or not a film has religious content or spiritual aspirations, it always constructs and draws willing viewers into a temporary yet powerful world that sustains their attention through vivid images and sounds. This sensorial and psychological immersion can lead the mind and influence the soul, and those effects stem directly from how the film is constructed. A movie’s cinematic techniques do not simply serve an idea; they create vividly felt vicarious experience. Tillich’s taxonomy of religious art suggests that a work of art may have an
overt religious theme (he mentions the *Madonna* of Rubens), yet its style may prevent viewers from making important religious connections. (The style Rubens used, he claims, works against Catholic belief about Mary.)

Similarly, a film may have an overt religious message but undercut its own purposes in how it presents itself, or the presentation may enhance an unworthy message. Whatever a film’s content, its style has emotional and spiritual dimensions. In some ways, the values that are implicit in the way a film communicates may have more impact than any explicit messages a film may attempt to convey.

Because the medium is so central to the message, those who are concerned about the spiritual qualities of movies need to become aware and critical of films’ methods. The content of movies deserves ongoing, careful consideration, but attention should also go toward cinematic form and the effects and functions of a filmmaker’s stylistic choices. While variations and alternatives exist, today the Hollywood film has set the standard for movie aesthetics. The artistry and success of contemporary films continue to be measured against this dominant style. Just what is the “Hollywood style”? Is this style adequate for spiritual purposes? If not, are there filmmaking forms, structures, and devices that when matched with Mormon theology could help express the most deeply held convictions and spiritual strivings of the Latter-day Saints? These are questions to consider in analyzing any film but are particularly interesting when looking at a major Church film such as *Legacy*. That movie both conforms to and departs from the conventional Hollywood style of film in important ways.

In 1993, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints premiered its first showcase historical film, *Legacy*, in a special theater constructed for its exhibition in the newly remodeled Joseph Smith Memorial Building. For six years, hourly screenings of *Legacy* gave Temple Square visitors the opportunity to experience early LDS Church history from its foundation in upstate New York in the 1830s to the laying of the Salt Lake Temple capstone in Utah in 1893. The Church has told its own story through film since *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* in 1913, but never before in such cinematic grandeur. In *Legacy*, director Kieth Merrill succeeded in creating a film whose production values were on par with Hollywood spectacles. Although shorter than most feature films (53 minutes), *Legacy’s* narrative span and visual scope were epic in nature, and through this film the Latter-day Saints’ story came across larger than life through 65mm film projected onto a near-IMAX-sized screen in its spacious new surround-sound theater.

While the Church makes no attempt to compete with mainstream films commercially, it has in many ways imitated Hollywood-style films
artistically, and *Legacy* epitomizes this effort. Even though its budget did not approach that of most Hollywood films, the production compares admirably with mid-range mainstream feature films. Its panoramic views of wagon trains compare to a John Ford western like *The Searchers* (1956) or to *Gone with the Wind* (1939) as the trudging pioneers rise into silhouette against an orange sky, dramatically filling the screen. Like such films, *Legacy* has authentic sets, period costumes, and a large cast to match the Hollywood style. In *Legacy*, the Mormon exodus is compellingly portrayed through visual and auditory splendor. Its makers have taken advantage of every aspect of cinematic spectacle currently available, including the uncommon large-format screen that is stories high. *Legacy* employs the full range of components that characterize the best of Hollywood moviemaking.

Given the predominance of film within contemporary culture and the broad familiarity of Hollywood fare, it is unsurprising that the Church would attempt to create films in a manner most familiar to its audiences. Elder John H. Groberg, commenting on the adaptation of his missionary memoir to the screen (*The Other Side of Heaven* [2001]), remarked, “The scriptures say the Lord speaks to each generation according to its own language. . . . And for good or for evil, the language of a lot of the youth today and a lot of the world today is movies.” The question is, how adequate is the language of Hollywood films for what Mormons have to say?

Elder Boyd K. Packer, critical of how some LDS artists have too closely imitated the world, cautioned, “There are many who struggle and climb and finally reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall.” Given the enormous investment of work and money required to produce films on par with Hollywood, and given the fact that the Hollywood style of film remains the ambition not just of some Church films but of most independent LDS filmmakers, it is worth evaluating the Hollywood style to see if Mormon filmmakers have their ladder leaning against the wrong wall. How adequate is this dominant style of film for Mormon beliefs and artistic expression? Given the religious importance of style, are there other options?

**The Hollywood Movie**

The classic Hollywood film that matured by the end of World War I and came to dominate global cinema by the 1940s has set the terms by which we recognize a movie to be a movie. Those terms are in part a set of expectations about where films are exhibited (commercial theaters and major TV and cable outlets) and their function within contemporary culture (as entertainment commodities). But a “Hollywood film” also consists
of a clearly definable set of artistic strategies for cinematic storytelling that have become conventional due to the very success and dominance of the American entertainment industry. These customs for constructing movie narratives, however, are not universal; they have simply evolved over time into the dominant mode of motion picture storytelling that we identify with Hollywood entertainment. Of course Hollywood films are not homogenous; a tremendous range of themes and artistic approaches are represented over the long and varied history of mainstream film. However, many identifiable artistic conventions remain consistent within Hollywood cinema that condition our general experience of the movies.

For example, we now expect films to focus on just a few central characters and the resolution of their problems. But the earliest narrative cinema had little complexity in characterization or any personalization of plot—think of the Keystone Cops or the swashbuckling of Douglas Fairbanks. In such early films, characters were subordinated to narrative action and were often little more than stereotypes. It was during the early decades of the twentieth century that narrative conventions began to formalize into what became the feature film. The artistic codification of film coincided with the evolution of motion pictures as an industry.

Practical production decisions and market forces affected the kinds of films that have become dominant and the style in which they are produced. One good example of this is the early move away from documentary toward fictional film. In the first decade of motion pictures (before about 1903), documentaries were more prominent than narrative films. But nonfiction films proved more difficult to make. Films that featured current events (“topicals”) or exotic places (“scenics”) were eagerly attended, but with such movies the filmmaker was subject to the erratic factors of weather, natural disaster or other spectacular events, and costly travel to locations. Such irregularity or cost did not fit the economics of the emerging entertainment industry. As film became established as a product in a market and movie studios became the factories producing this commodity, their owners required a scheduled, consistent output to fill demand. The answer to this problem was to bring all aspects of film production together in a controlled environment—the studio. The sound stages of a movie studio gave absolute control over time and place in ways the topicals and scenics could not, so it was natural within the emerging industry to move to fictional narratives whose locations could be controlled through sets and costumes. Professional actors could be directed to be whatever character was scripted, providing further control for the business-oriented studios. Fictional narratives are easier to make and sell as products, and
The success of the film industry cemented the fictional narrative as the cultural norm.\textsuperscript{10} The exhibition strategies for Hollywood films also developed according to what best fit the needs of commerce. Competition and advertising among early filmmakers influenced the traits that would become the expected norms of mainstream movies by what they emphasized. For example, early filmmakers boasted the realism of their creations as a major selling point.\textsuperscript{11} Because Hollywood films were becoming commodities, their producers sought commercial advantage by advertising appealing aspects of their films—such as a film’s historical authenticity. This had less to do with locations, the correct historical sequence of events, or authentic depictions of historical characters, and more to do with the apparent authenticity of interesting period sets and costumes. This visual appeal related to another major selling point for film—the very size and cost of their productions. The fact that a film required a “cast of thousands” or involved lavish expense to create the sets became a selling point, a part of the spectacle of the film that could draw crowds. Today, with the assistance of digital technologies and special effects, films can easily fabricate credible worlds of myth and fantasy, readily drawing viewers into such “realistic” presentations. These effects are so intricate and interesting in their own right that they have regularly become the subject of documentary films themselves and bring glamour and celebrity to the films they enhance. Another appeal to sell films has been movie stars. Because celebrity sells, filmmakers have not only cast famous people but created or enhanced their celebrity and then benefited from the box office draw of those celebrities. In Hollywood this has evolved the “star system,” in which films are “vehicles” for movie stars. This materially affects the look of a film, for it must then showcase the star, often glamorously. It also affects the way stories are made and told; characters are created to feature stars, and plots are constructed to keep attention on these personalities.

As movies have vied for prominence and played up these various appeals, they have become more and more expensive. Lavish sets, breathtaking cinematography, state-of-the-art special effects, and the look and appeal of celebrities are part of the dominant style, and as such are the expected norm. These expectations have proven a great barrier to the success of independent films or the development of minority cinemas precisely because of elevated “production values”—the money spent on spectacle. A Hollywood-style film can be prohibitively costly; however, if a film does not achieve or approximate mainstream production values, it may not even count, in Hollywood terms, as a film at all.
Eventually, an entire set of film practices would be built up around the effort to maximize the illusion of the fictional film world’s realism. These well-established conventions include *mise-en-scène* (the visual arrangement of sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting), framing (the camera’s point of view), continuity editing (a logical and visual seamlessness between shots), the shot/reverse shot (the set pattern for filming conversations, which gives the illusion that the viewer is a close participant, present among those talking), and respecting the “axis of action” (keeping the cameras on one side of an imaginary line so that viewers construct a consistent sense of physical space). By these techniques, what one sees on screen appears governed by spatial and temporal verisimilitude. Again, this did not have to be so. Theater, a related popular art form, has thrived in the absence of such verisimilitude. From these patterns emerged the formalized narrative model now labeled the “Institutional Mode of Representation” or IMR.12 The classic Hollywood-style film usually adheres to a familiar plot pattern in which crisis moves toward resolution in a logical, cause-and-effect manner. Most often, some event disrupts a preexisting equilibrium in the fictional world and the task of the story is to resolve the enigma by bringing it to a new equilibrium. This leads to another prominent requirement of standard Hollywood film—narrative closure. That is to say, the story should have a clear beginning, middle, and end in which nearly every question raised is answered. And unlike the earliest films that placed action above character, the Hollywood style insists upon protagonists who are psychologically well-rounded characters that sustain our attention and whose actions bring about the necessary narrative resolution. Psychological verisimilitude is required for the principal characters in the story and for the audience members who are invited to identify with the characters’ situations.

The classical Hollywood narrative has been termed “an excessively obvious cinema.”13 To maximize appeal to as many people as possible, a lowest-common-denominator approach is taken with the narrative. Every element of the film contributes directly to developing and resolving the familiar complication-resolution story pattern within the standard 90 to 120 minutes. Editing, for example, is to be invisible, seamlessly relating one shot or scene to another in the most direct and logical manner (continuity editing). “The film should be comprehensible and unambiguous.”14 Hollywood films are easy to understand both logically and emotionally because every component of the film—story, actors, sets, editing, music—together contributes to following the main character’s journey toward crisis and resolution; viewers are guided every step of the way.
In summary, the classical Hollywood style of film consists of a fictional narrative of high spatial and temporal verisimilitude (usually requiring high production values) whose various artistic elements are unified around advancing a central character’s story from crisis to resolution in an emotionally engaging and unambiguous way. Once we understand the Hollywood style as a style—as a set of choices and not as an inherent requirement of the medium—then alternatives become available. Any characteristics of Hollywood film may or may not be appropriate for religious filmmaking generally or for Mormon cinema as it evolves. What will be apparent from a closer look at Legacy will be how the Hollywood style has been adopted in many ways as a part of institutional LDS filmmaking, and what this might portend for emerging Mormon cinema.

**Legacy and Classical Hollywood Style**

Legacy recounts the story of early Mormonism and the westward migration of the Mormon people. This is done through a frame story (a story nesting another story within it) that begins at the film’s historical endpoint—Salt Lake City in 1893, at the occasion of the Salt Lake Temple’s dedication. An old woman, the “elderly” Eliza, is relating to her grandson her “legacy of faith.” Her story frames the Mormon narrative in its historical and spiritual contexts. After her introduction as an older woman reflecting back in time, the action flashes back to the 1830s to Eliza as a young girl and follows her personal story forward in time as her family converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, joins its westward migration, and shares its persecutions and trials. Most of the film’s screen time is spent in the Nauvoo period where the Nauvoo Temple is under construction. Eliza sees the temple rise and finds happiness in marrying a young English convert, David. But the Prophet Joseph is assassinated and the Saints are driven out, this time to the valley of the Great Salt Lake. The film ends in Utah with the elderly Eliza’s challenge to her grandson to hold on to the legacy of faith that has been passed down to him—and by implication, to the film’s viewers.

As suggested above, Legacy represents the Church’s most successful effort to that point at imitating Hollywood-style films and, more specifically, the genre of traditional religious film. Its overall presentational form, structure, and stylistics are patterned after bigger-than-life Hollywood features like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or *Ben Hur* (1959). Like those films, Legacy suggests the importance of its subject by its scope—across time, narratively, as it covers various periods of Church history; across space, visually, with wide shots of vistas suggesting the magnitude of the
Mormon migration; and through its theatrical presentation on 65mm film in an IMAX-like theater with surround sound. The visual style is richly abundant, with period costumes and sets interesting for their historical accuracy. Whether it is the story locations of Independence, Haun’s Mill, or Nauvoo, the scenes are large, authentic, and carefully art directed. Indeed, the scale of the film’s presentational form puts the art direction in control of almost all aspects of the film’s stylistic approach. The 65mm form and the visual backdrop for the action overpower all other elements, except perhaps sound.

In its use of sound, especially the music score, *Legacy* clearly follows the Hollywood model. A symphonic score is used for each scene and sequence, including a selection of Mormon hymns sung by the Tabernacle Choir, as well as classically rendered pieces. As in films from Hollywood’s classical era, music is used “wall-to-wall,” providing an emotionally rich experience. *Legacy* exemplifies cinematic sensuousness at its height.

The film is impressive as spectacle, and like the best of Hollywood films, it fully immerses the viewer into its projected world. Unlike other religious epics, however, *Legacy* does not bring to the forefront a dominant religious figure such as Moses. *Legacy* is obviously not the Church’s counterpart to Zanuck’s 1940 *Brigham Young*, nor is it the life story of Joseph Smith—though both men appear in the film. Instead, it is the fictional Everywoman, Eliza Morley, who demands our attention and who provides the framework for recounting the Mormon experience. Following a single protagonist and identifying with her psychologically is conventional for classical filmmaking, and *Legacy* adheres to this (at least initially), as well as to other standard elements of Hollywood films that together give viewers ample means to be drawn into its imaginative world.

And yet in important ways *Legacy* also departs from the Hollywood style. This starts with its treatment of the main character. Within the Hollywood style, attention is constantly directed to the central protagonist, and the plot follows his or her actions and their consequences. Film techniques in *Legacy* seem to confirm this role for Eliza. The story-within-a-story framing device places the older Eliza authoritatively at both ends of the narrative. In young Eliza’s opening scene in the barn and later in the house as she first meets Joseph Smith, lighting is controlled for dramatic effect. Shafts of light and careful backlighting present Eliza in a hallowed setting with the young Mormon prophet. These devices and her priority in the overall film clearly establish her as the central character. She is even part of a romantic love triangle—another strong indication that we are to pay attention to her fate. Yet, contrary to Hollywood custom, *Legacy*’s central protagonist actually drifts in and out of the narrative.
The film’s emotional focus does not stay on Eliza, her crises, and their resolution. Obvious opportunities to heighten the personal drama of her life are repeatedly passed by. For example, as Eliza is courted by two men, the three of them never appear in the same scene together. The romantic scenes are very short, almost implied. In fact, Jacob, the older suitor, never gets an opportunity to voice his affections to Eliza on screen. At another point, when Eliza suffers from cholera and is blessed by Jacob and Joseph Smith, the two men arrive and with little dramatic setup place their hands on her head, and she is healed. The entire sequence is shot from a wide angle with only two quick reaction shots from bystanders. Little care is taken to construct a seamless visual progression of images that build the realistic dramatic moment. Even though this scene has the potential (in a classic Hollywood presentation) of becoming highly charged, it is never framed or edited to take advantage of the moment (as are the dramatically constructed blessings scenes from *God’s Army* [2000] and *The Other Side of Heaven* [2001]). By the time *Legacy* enters its final third, young Eliza has all but disappeared from the storyline. If she were not the voice-over narrator, she would essentially disappear before the film’s conclusion.

Another difference from standard Hollywood storytelling is *Legacy*’s lack of a strong sense of narrative closure. The film does have a formal ending (through the return of the elder Eliza and her exhortation to the next generation), but it lacks closure in the conventional sense because at this point viewers are no longer identifying as much with Eliza and because the overall structure does not point toward a clear resolution. Rather, we are offered an alternative structure that is more cyclical, a repeating pattern: the problem of whether the Saints will ever find a place to worship in peace. That question is asked and answered through a rise-and-fall episodic structure with no definitive ending to the pattern. As with Eliza’s life, for the Mormons nothing ever resolves itself conclusively. Even though they eventually arrive at the Great Salt Lake Valley, there is no classic denouement, no clear-cut conclusion beyond the fact that they have reached their geographical destination. This atypical treatment of character and plot may not fit the Hollywood style, but it is consistent with some elements of an alternative cinematic style identified by Paul Schrader, explained below.

Another deviation from Hollywood filmmaking is the way *Legacy* does not rely upon continuity editing. In traditional narrative film, a character looks across a room, for example, and the shot that follows is a view of the object this person is looking at. This is logical, and in mainstream films we have come to expect the way this simple technique suggests spatial and psychological continuity from shot to shot and scene to scene. Rather than
using this “invisible” method to connect scenes, Legacy relies heavily on Eliza’s voice-over narration to link the progression of episodes. Continuity editing is minimal when compared to classic Hollywood structure. There are very few editing effects other than the standard alternation of master and close-up shots. But even then, scenes are presented as though two-dimensional at times—stylized, even, as in a tableau. The actors work in groups of two or three, facing the camera in framing that appears almost more theatrical than natural. In this respect, Legacy is inconsistent with the classic Hollywood style that attempts to use composition and editing to enhance verisimilitude. These various departures from traditional cinematic techniques may have come about more through production constraints than through design, but in any case they undercut the film’s efforts at realism. Doing so, however, may in fact prove one of the film’s merits, rather than faults, at least if Legacy is measured by one important alternative aesthetic model for religious film.

Paul Schrader’s Transcendental Style

Screenwriter and director Paul Schrader criticized the Hollywood approach to religion in his early 1972 study, Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer. Although he ended up joining the very industry he criticized—his credits include collaborations with Martin Scorsese on Hollywood successes like Taxi Driver (1976) and Raging Bull (1980)—his films have nevertheless retained strongly religious aspects. Described as “religious pilgrimages,” his films involve a specific sort of “redemptive motif” consistent with principal components of his theoretical work. Schrader’s study affirms film to be a vital medium for spiritual experience, but he claims that the Hollywood style actually impedes such experience. He sets forth an alternative film aesthetic which he has identified in the works of certain international directors—Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer. Schrader found in these directors’ works a cinematic style that specifically addresses the spiritual, that “reach[es] toward the other-worldly.” Examining films such as Ozu’s Tokyo Story (1953), Bresson’s The Diary of a Country Priest (1951), and Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928), Schrader observed what he termed a “transcendental style.” This consisted of a set of distinct structural and formal traits that together create a singular spiritual effect. Though problematic in many ways, Schrader’s transcendental style offers a well-developed and spiritually oriented approach by which to analyze Legacy from a contrasting perspective.
Schrader starts from a different position than most in considering religion and film; he contends that the stylistic techniques of filmmaking have more to do with a film’s religious nature than does the actual subject matter. With French filmmaker Robert Bresson, he believes “the subject of a film is only a pretext. Form much more than content touches a viewer and elevates him.”

Spiritual elevation through the aesthetics of cinematic form is not easy, however, precisely because of the sensuous realism of film. It is Schrader’s contention, referring to the thinking of French neorealist André Bazin, that “the spiritual quality in art suffered its decline at the expense of ‘realism.’” The cinematic medium, grounded in the material world of sensuous imagery, insists on a reality that is vividly present for the viewer. In contrast, traditional art forms have been able to distort or reshape the realistic image in order to give the impression of seeing beyond physical reality to a deeper, spiritual (more “truthful”) reality. The immediacy of the film image, its ability to reproduce reality, “canonized the human, sensual and profane: it celebrated the realistic.” Consequently, traditional mainstream films do not urge viewers on toward a deeper truth beyond the surface reality or toward any sort of spiritual communion or transcendence. By giving viewers more physical reality, films give viewers less spiritual reality.

This is true, claims Schrader, even of those films that are openly religious or faith-affirming. Schrader is especially critical of “sex-and-sand” religious spectacles epitomized by the work of Cecil B. DeMille. These fail in their spiritual potential not because of their treatment of biblical history but due to their form. As is typical in Hollywood entertainment, such films rely on an abundance of visual, narrative, and musical methods. Such qualities give these movies their immediacy, to be sure, but according to Schrader, doing so fundamentally misaligns spirituality with cinematic reality. The spiritual logic in DeMille’s films, according to Schrader, is flawed, because for DeMille, “the film is ‘real,’ the spiritual is ‘on’ film, ergo: the spiritual is real.” In other words, through its familiar methods, Hollywood provides viewers a vivid sense of reality; indeed, the whole idea is that one gets caught up in the film’s realistic presentation. But being caught up in the film is a different thing than actually communing with the divine or connecting to a deeper, transcendent reality. Something like the divine finger of fire carving the Ten Commandments out of solid rock may be religiously interesting and reaffirming to one’s convictions, but it is not an encounter with the divine, and achieving such encounters is a more genuine religious purpose or function for film than simply the positive portrayal of beliefs or religious history. Schrader instead asks how film can create “hierophanies”—spiritual or otherworldly manifestations that erupt...
within earthly time and space. His focus is phenomenological—oriented to the personal, even mystical, experience of the viewer. This means the craft of religious film, as he sees it, should not be geared toward presenting re-creations of events from religious history, but to moving the viewer through a spiritual process culminating in an actual encounter with the divine—transcendence.

Using his favorite directors as models, Schrader claims there is a discernible method for effecting that transcendence. His study isolates specific stylistic elements and structural devices expressive of the transcendent. No matter the cultural or religious setting, he claims, there exist certain cinematic methods, “precise temporal means—camera angles, dialogue, editing—for predetermined transcendental ends.” All of the techniques of the transcendental style work to get beyond the immediacy of film’s sensuous image and the realism and emotional involvement emphasized in the established Hollywood style. The dramatic events that pass for real life in traditional Hollywood films are sustained by “emotional constructs—plot, acting, camerawork, editing, music.” In the transcendental style, however, every stylistic tool is used not to create a realistic experience but to postpone emotional involvement and undercut verisimilitude.

This denial of the immediate satisfactions of conventional film methods is critical to preparing for a transcendent experience. Otherwise, viewers will be emotionally satisfied by the immediate sensuous experience of the film and will not be ready for transcendence. To avoid this, the transcendental style begins with reworking traditional narrative elements. The classical plotline of a beginning, middle, and end is rejected and replaced by a cyclical structure, a “rhythmic” pacing of “ritual.” The acting is modified into “relatively simple, demonstrable characteristics,” and psychological interest in characters is downplayed. Otherwise, if viewers identified closely with characters, the emotional dynamics of the film would be tied to the characters’ fates, immersing the viewer in psychological realism at the expense of a transcendent reality. Since Schrader’s theory calls for no dramatic structure or three-dimensional characters, editing is governed by “regular, unostentatious cuts” in which each shot, each event, “[leads] only to the next.” No attempt is made to edit for impact or for juxtaposing angles or scenes. All sound is eliminated except for natural ambience, reinforcing a concern for the “minutiae of life,” “the cold reality,” and music is used sparingly.
Schrader’s Three-Part Movement

These stylistic elements support a three-part narrative structure that Schrader identifies as the central dynamic of the transcendental style. As the various stylistic tools strip away the immediacy and the sensuous nature of the cinematic image, viewers begin the process of preparing for a spiritual experience by “moving through” the realism of the motion picture they are viewing to something deeper. Schrader identifies three parts to this process, which he labels “the everyday,” “disparity,” and “stasis.”

1. The Everyday. By the “everyday,” Schrader refers to the way certain filmmakers have initiated the process of transcendence through the “meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living.” The “everyday” cuts against film’s sensuousness and “annuls the viewer’s natural desire to participate vicariously in the action on screen.” This may seem counterintuitive, but it prepares the viewer for what is to come by “preventing him from seeing [life] as he is accustomed” and undercutting the image’s power to distract us by its presentation of sensuous reality. For the viewer to capture a glimpse of the ineffable, the filmmaker must reject all “conventional interpretations of reality.” The viewer is thus better prepared to “face the Unknown.” All of this is “a prelude to the moment of redemption”; that is, to that moment when the viewer can transcend the film’s surface reality to a higher expression of the “Wholly Other.” The viewers undergo a kind of sanctification and preparation that can happen only as the filmmaker denies them opportunities to succumb to the pleasures that would otherwise keep them anchored to the film’s engaging but limited reality.

2. Disparity. As images of the “everyday” compound, viewers sense that “there are deep, untapped feelings just below the surface” of the film’s realistic presentation. This Schrader labels as “disparity.” Disparity is “the paradox of the spiritual existing within the physical,” a spiritual reality that is attempting to rupture out into physical reality. It is experienced as a growing sense of expectation. Such an attitude would not occur if the sumptuousness of traditional Hollywood cinema were present to satisfy the hungers it creates. For the audience to “see” the deeper or transcendent reality, the filmmaker must pound away at the immediacy of the sensuous cinematic reality. Rather than inviting viewers to enjoy the pleasures of film’s reality, the filmmaker attempts to negate those very pleasures, robbing them of their immediacy through careful repetition of the “everyday.” This is not the same as desensitization, through which viewers become numb through overstimulation. The transcendental style’s subtle repetitions do not deaden response, but refocus the viewers’ desire for resolution.
by leading them into an “emotionally irresolvable dilemma” that requires a carefully constructed emotional release, or a moment of “stasis.”

3. Stasis. “Stasis” provides Schrader’s emotional, transcendental climax, the calculated moment of transcendence made possible because of the compounding of the “everyday” that creates anxiety and expectation. “Stasis” is not the climax in the traditional sense of a narrative arc; it is not narratively logical, nor is it psychologically associated with resolving action. Rather, the final phase of the transcendental style “serves to freeze the emotional into expression, the disparity into stasis.”38 Another way of understanding this mysterious destination point is that “stasis” names the moment of transcendence, a summoning (or relieving) of emotion in response to a triggering technique which can “transport us into a region that is no longer simply terrestrial, but rather cosmic.”39 This is triggered by the use of a static shot, “a blast of music,” or “an overt symbol.”40 An illustration is when Ozu cuts away from the interior setting of a family drama at the height of “disparity” to a static, tranquil shot of nature; or when Bresson holds on an image of a smoldering cross in The Trial of Joan of Arc. Stasis freezes the empathy that has been created within the viewer, “transform[ing] empathy into aesthetic appreciation, experience into expression, emotion into form,”41 and thereby expressing something deeper than itself: the inner unity of all things. Disparity is not resolved, but transcended.42

Obviously this final stage is not easy to explain; the otherworldly is always difficult to convey with worldly terms. For Schrader, conventional cinema presents an obvious imaginative world that is readily entered and fully rational. Spirituality is not about depicting religious events or being lost in a work of art, but being found in communion with the divine. The only avenue to the otherworldly is through denial of the rich world of images and sounds that movies so amply provide. Schrader’s three-part movement and the cinematic tools for effecting it may be hard to grasp or to accept, but this may be due to viewers’ never having been exposed to films like Ozu’s, Bresson’s, or Dreyer’s, where moments of transcendence follow the dynamic Schrader describes. This begs the question as to whether the transcendental style is only an art film phenomenon. But Schrader at least demonstrates how some stylistic devices have been employed to provide alternative models to the standard Hollywood approach.

One critic describes Schrader’s own films in terms of the transcendental style (without naming it as such): “In films directed by Schrader, a redemptive motif is usually driven to a single moment of resolution captured in a frozen last image, a symbolic stylistic gesture that Schrader borrowed from Bresson.”43 This “stasis” moment is evident in Scorsese’s The
Last Temptation of Christ (1988), written by Schrader. In a long fictional fantasy sequence, Christ (hanging on the cross) is offered the opportunity not to die but to live an everyday life. At the moment when he rejects this temptation, the fantasy breaks suddenly and Christ is seen again on the cross in a frozen image of his joy. At the moment when he accepts his own redemptive mission, he completes it. This moment comes abruptly, accompanied by flashes of color and bells ringing, and is followed almost immediately by the closing credits. Though the film generally plays to the sensuousness of Hollywood film, its narrative climax (which Schrader adapted from the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis) clearly displays the influence of the transcendental style. Though the transcendental style is an attempt at reversing the traditional Hollywood model, Schrader’s own work demonstrates that this religious aesthetic is not completely incompatible with mainstream film.

Latter-day Saints and the Transcendental Style

Could there be a similarity between Schrader’s transcendental style and the filmic style exhibited in LDS movies? Are techniques similar to what Schrader describes at work in LDS films such as Legacy? Although Latter-day Saints would certainly be sympathetic to any serious attempt to seek or create spiritual experience through the medium of film, Schrader’s approach presents several difficulties. First of all, Mormons, like so many other casual filmgoers, have been conditioned to expect and enjoy the many conventional cinematic elements that mainstream film has accustomed them to—a linear plot, psychological identification with leading characters, and enjoyment of the visual and auditory splendor of the movie medium, among others. To downplay emotional appeals (or the music that so often cues emotion in the viewer) would seem to many Latter-day Saints to work against achieving a realistic presentation of spiritual moments on screen. This is especially true since Church films have relied heavily upon Hollywood’s emotional techniques, such as mood music, to signal spiritual messages.

A second problem is that Latter-day Saints do not really have a concept of “transcendence” within their theology. They believe that a few select individuals have been “translated” to a higher physical or spiritual form, but LDS theology does not use the term “transcendence” to refer to personal religious experience. Schrader’s “transcendence” identifies a process leading to a singular and abrupt change in one’s spiritual being, an encounter with God. Mormon encounters with deity do not rule out visions and personal visitations of heavenly beings, but encounters with
God are typically instances in which one feels his presence through the Holy Ghost. This can occur in any context but is considered very personal. Latter-day Saints do not understand spirituality as something orchestrated through artistic techniques or mapped to a psychological process like the three movements Schrader describes. Still, they can sympathize strongly with Schrader’s intense focus upon the spiritual state of movie viewers as they look at the religious phenomenology of film, and LDS resistance to Hollywood worldliness could make Mormons sympathetic to arguments against accepting Hollywood’s style uncritically.

A more significant problem for Latter-day Saints in accepting the transcendental style of film is the fact that Schrader’s approach rests upon a theology that perceives spiritual reality as immaterial and “other,” with little connection to physical reality or experience. This is fundamentally at odds with LDS belief about the physical nature of God and the spiritual nature of physical matter. Schrader’s argument concerning the sensuousness of the cinematic medium seems reasonable—that the moving image holds us too close to the physical nature of reality—but this will likely fail to convince Latter-day Saints that the final objective of a transcendent experience is an intangible expression of an ineffable divinity. LDS theology holds that the transcendent, God, is an embodied reality. This translates into a deep appreciation of materiality. For Mormons, the sensuous cinematic image, like the sensuous world, might actually embody the divine, not prove an obstacle to it. Thus, an aesthetic that systematically works against the realism of film may not be suited to Mormon belief.

There is ample reason for the typically pragmatic Latter-day Saints to value the “everyday,” but what of “disparity”? Certainly they have a keen sense of the duality of existence as they contrast the mundane with the spiritual. But within Schrader’s three-part movement, “disparity” elicits the spiritual through an anxious dissatisfaction with the present—an echo of the Protestant emphasis on a fallen world. This is something less consonant with Mormon optimism about this life. As for “stasis,” it may be that Schrader’s concept is too tied to an immaterial and distant deity to make sense to a Latter-day Saint.

Still, as a serious attempt to find a spiritual approach to film and as an alternative to the Hollywood style, Schrader’s transcendental style deserves a closer look.

The Transcendental and Hollywood Styles in Legacy

As mentioned above, *Legacy* shares in but also makes critical departures from classical Hollywood style. Since Schrader’s transcendental
style is almost a complete negation of Hollywood’s artistic approach, it is possible that where Legacy departs from the Hollywood style it may come close to Schrader’s paradigm. For example, Schrader’s rejection of the classical plotline, replacing it with a cyclical structure, is very similar to the episodic structure of Legacy. The episodic rise and fall of the Mormon westward movement with its lack of definitive resolution is very similar to Schrader’s description of the cyclical structure of the transcendent style. The repeated trials of the Latter-day Saints can be seen as this “rhythmic” pacing of “ritual.” In addition, because Legacy’s characters are largely two-dimensional (and the protagonist becomes less well-rounded over time), this fits Schrader’s insistence on a minimal acting style downplaying psychological interest in characters. The static camera shots in Legacy effectively avoid leading the viewers’ point of view, undercutting connection with a realistic, three-dimensional world. In place of continuity editing, Schrader insists on “regular, unostentatious cuts” in which each event “[leads] only to the next.” While Legacy does make some edits for effect, it resists many opportunities to edit for continuity.

With respect to sound and music, however, Legacy counters the transcendental style and clearly aligns itself with conventional Hollywood film. The rich sound effects go well beyond the use of ambient sound and give little chance to build up the realism of life’s “cold reality.” And the wall-to-wall symphonic score most certainly does not establish a moment for a distinctive “blast of music” to punctuate decisive moments, as Schrader wishes. Legacy’s music is far too ubiquitous and clearly emblematic of Hollywood traditions. Further aligning itself with conventional film, Legacy’s rich visual style is diametrically opposed to the transcendental style. Legacy reinforces the realistic presentation, rather than reducing it, with its saturated colors and large format. Still, although the sensuousness of the 65mm image is overwhelming, there is a static quality in its images. The world of Legacy is a compelling spectacle, but it is more iconic than three-dimensional. The lasting impression is of a tableau—a line of wagons filing across the plains, or it is the image of the Nauvoo Temple white against a gray sky, a static symbol of Mormon achievement. Viewers experience a succession of such images, each grandly pictorial. As such, these images function less dramatically and more symbolically. While they are grand and realistic, these images do not draw us into this imaginative world; they leave us with a lingering, cumulative impression of the Latter-day Saints’ sojourn and suffering. To the extent that the images of Legacy are iconic, rather than dynamic, they are more in keeping with the two-dimensional, stylized representations found in medieval art. Ironically, images made grand
enough actually may become less realistic and more mythic in nature, and this seems much in keeping with Schrader’s theory.

Apart from its 65mm format and exuberant treatment of sound and music, it appears that Legacy does apply several particulars of Schrader’s transcendental style, though perhaps unknowingly and perhaps not for the same purpose or effect. The “everyday” as Schrader found it in Bresson’s films is of a different character than anything in Legacy, and yet within Legacy’s rising and falling episodic structure there is something that approximates the same effect. Over and over again, the Saints are forced from one settlement to the next. Rather than reinforcing a dramatic narrative structure with its inciting event and rising action that reaches a climax and resolves through denouement, the structure of Legacy rises and falls, rises and falls across a series of historical events. Whether or not this results in “disparity,” with its discomfiting experience of anxiety and expectation within the viewer, depends on one’s personal response to Legacy. It may be that the musical score and rich visual style are satisfying enough that the viewer never experiences the sense that something is lying behind or beyond the sensuous experience of the movie, as Schrader’s theory requires. This is difficult to gauge, given its subjectivity, but there is evidence of “stasis” within Legacy.

Toward the film’s conclusion, Legacy’s structure shifts completely away from any sense of a Hollywood narrative. Realistic characters now function as types; specific historical events no longer control the film’s

Wide, sweeping shots of the Saints coming across the plains can be interpreted as an attempt to give the film an epic, Hollywood-style flourish. But something else may be at work: Legacy’s collective protagonist reflects Latter-day Saint belief that the greatest work is accomplished not by individuals but by a multigenerational body of Saints. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
structure. The film’s realistic timeline shifts into a timeless montage of wagon train images. All the scenes are shot in wide angle, but a rhythm builds climactically through music and editing. This could be considered the film’s high point—and its transcendent moment—but it does not play out according to Schrader’s formula. While the film is grounded on an episodic structure, the narrative is not resolved, nor is there a singular “burst of music” signaling an eruption of the divine into the mundane. Eliza is there to deliver her final words about passing on a legacy, but this is done quietly. The story is not about her, nor is she there to effect a transcendent moment. The lasting image from the film, the legacy of Legacy, is that static tableau, the iconic mural, as it were, of the Saints in caravan crossing the plains. Rather than revealing the divine on screen or symbolically through aural eruption, the story and the style point to a future encounter with the divine.

The sensuous and emotional emphasis of Legacy makes it more consonant with the Hollywood than the transcendental style of film, but in some ways it deviates from both. Legacy’s mixing of stylistic elements might even be considered more aligned with a documentary approach than with traditional narrative. Although no specific documentary elements connect the fictional aspects of the film to actual historical events (such as historical photographs or diary excerpts), it is clear that the film’s final result is not just a realistic drama but a presentational testament to the realities that tested and shaped the Mormon experience and doctrine. But Legacy lacks the detachment of documentary, just as it lacks the full engagement of Eliza’s story that a Hollywood approach would require. Eliza actually functions more like the narrator of a documentary film than as the protagonist of this historical drama. Legacy is in fact docudrama, with Eliza’s narration serving as our guide and the authorized voice of the Church.

LDS Departures from Both Styles

The Hollywood and transcendental styles, despite being defined in opposition to one another, share certain presuppositions about crafting the experiences of viewers. Whatever its complexities, the transcendental style boils down to the presupposition that a film’s style can effect transcendence. Latter-day Saints, as many other people of faith, would resist the notion that spirituality can be scripted. And yet, this is precisely the religious problem at the root of the Hollywood style, as well. Its various means (especially the immediacy of its imagery and musical score) are calculated to effect an emotional state. When brought to such a state, is this a spiritual moment, or are viewers simply responding to the emotional cues to which they have been accustomed? This is particularly problematic
with Church films, whose implicit purpose is spiritual but whose explicit form relies on heavy emotional cuing.

In a general conference address, Elder Richard G. Scott taught Church members to distinguish carefully between emotion and the Spirit. He stated that spiritual impressions are often “accompanied by powerful emotions that make it difficult to speak and bring tears to the eyes.” But he cautioned, “A testimony is not emotion. It is the very essence of character woven from threads born of countless correct decisions.” He correlates spiritual assurance with moral actions, not with passive acceptance of emotionally influential works of art or entertainment. While not trying to oversimplify the very complex issue of personal response to film, it would still seem inconsistent for a Mormon aesthetic to include the manipulation of emotions or to do anything to cause people to confuse emotions with genuine spiritual promptings.

Emotional manipulation, or at least the potential to confuse spiritual and emotional experience, are obvious concerns with Legacy (as well as similar Church films) because of the sensational emotional appeal of its visual and auditory grandeur. Moreover, the inclusion of a romantic love triangle would seem to further confuse spiritual and emotional responses to the film, since the screen romance (with its conventional emotional dynamic) is woven seamlessly into the larger religious narrative. Viewers’ emotional engagement in David’s joining the Church and his joining Eliza in marriage are continuous with each other, if not indistinguishable, which is problematic. However, these emotional complexities are minimized to the extent that Eliza herself is. Just as she is not truly an objective observer in a documentary, she is not a true leading lady in a typical screen romance. Her presence is not compelling, so neither is our investment in the story of her two suitors.

If there is a possibility of emotional manipulation in Legacy, it is not found in Eliza’s character or personal story. In Legacy, viewers can actually forget that its main character is the protagonist—something impossible within traditional cinema. If anything, the emotional appeal of Legacy pertains to the depiction of the community of Mormons striving together. Eliza’s life is not important to focus on, finally, because in the end her life has become subordinate to the larger movement of the Latter-day Saints. She merely provides us a glimpse of what it means to be part of a larger religious community’s “legacy of faith.” Like the stories of other Latter-day Saints, her personal story is swallowed up in the grander enterprise of the kingdom of God, and the cinematic grandeur of Legacy correlates to this less personal, more communal, emphasis. Perhaps the group-as-protagonist signals Legacy’s innovation of a specifically Mormon film aesthetic.
Film Styles in Legacy

The Body of Christ as the Basis of a Distinctive Mormon Aesthetic

Legacy includes many recognizable elements of the Hollywood production style, yet its narrative focus on the group, rather than the individual, overturns a central tenet of mainstream film. Similarly, Legacy includes many identifiable elements of the transcendental style, yet its narrative structure also violates the three-part process Schrader outlines for the transcendental style; the film never climaxes in a singular moment of emotional release (stasis). Legacy also borrows somewhat from documentary style, with Eliza providing narrative coherence across a series of episodes through her voice-over; yet Eliza is neither an objective authority nor a historical figure. As the film ultimately subordinates her story to that of the Mormons generally, Eliza’s character serves to reinforce a style and structure oriented to the communal. Rather than being an exception to other aesthetic models, this becomes the grounds for a specifically Mormon approach to film.

The centrality of the group and its striving toward the social and religious ideal of Zion is thematically grounded in the story of ancient Israel and can be found broadly in Jewish and Christian art and literature. A literary example from Mormonism is Maurine Whipple’s The Giant Joshua—considered by many to be the greatest Mormon novel to date—which portrays Mormon pioneers traveling to and establishing their society in southern Utah.49 But cinematic correlatives to a group aesthetic are more difficult to find, given the dominance of the Hollywood narrative form and the primacy of the individual protagonist within that tradition. Religious films like DeMille’s Ten Commandments, though based on the story of Israelites in the Bible, tend to celebrate the individual rather than the group. Moses-as-prophet becomes Moses-as-hero within a fairly traditional role as a protagonist whose fate takes precedence over the group he leads and represents.

Some politically oriented documentaries have emphasized group identity and ambition, such as the newsreels popular in World War II. Leni Riefenstahl’s famous propaganda film documenting the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens, 1935), depicts Germans as a united, powerful group marching toward an ideal civilization. From Soviet cinema, Dziga Vertov’s documentary film, One Sixth of the World (Shestaya Chast Mira, 1926), depicts and catalogues the disparate peoples of the Soviet Union, promoting social cohesion across the broadly dispersed peoples of that nation. The highly biased nature of these political documentaries reminds us that group-oriented films can be propagandistic, especially those sponsored by an institution (political,
religious, or corporate) desiring to shape public opinion. *Legacy* could be read as propaganda; it certainly attempts to frame public understanding of Mormon history. However, it lacks the present and pressing social purpose of propaganda films. There is no call to action, not even an overt missionary invitation. *Legacy* seems intent not on selling the religion but on documenting its character. And that character is unmistakably community oriented and religiously committed.

The collective protagonist of *Legacy* reflects a central Christian ideal, the body of Christ, which has long been compared to the Church and its members: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). No one generation—and clearly no individual figure or character—assumes more importance than the next. *Legacy’s* collective character communicates that the real work of the kingdom is accomplished less individually than communally. Despite the fact that individuals in Church history, such as prophets, are revered and even idealized, it is the collective body of believing Saints that accomplishes the work and moves the Church forward. The collective body of Christ extends even beyond the specific historical group depicted, incorporating and binding one generation to the next in their united search for Zion.

A sequence toward the end of *Legacy* illustrates the potency of this group aesthetic. The setting is gloomy. It is raining. As the wagons weave through tangled trees, the Morley family wagon slides off the trail, tumbles into the river, and capsizes. The horses thrash about desperately. Other characters rush in to help the distressed. This is perhaps the most moving scene in the film. The wagon falling was in fact an unscripted accident, yet the actors stay in character and the event becomes strongly representative of actual pioneer hardships. It is shot with a master shot and a couple of medium shots of the Morley family collecting themselves on the river bank, then gathering their belongings and trudging on westward. The scene’s actuality draws the viewers emotionally into it. Viewers sense that the scene is “real,” and, as the images wash over them, they hear, “Come, Come Ye Saints” underneath. This is not hierophany, a revelation in blinding light; this is not a highly charged dramatic Hollywood resolution, nor is it Schrader’s stasis, but a simple and profound illumination of devotion, a devotion that reminds viewers of the divine, as seen through the conviction and witness of others; and it is found in the witness of the many, not the one. The divine is seen in the Saints’ undaunted onward movement as a body of suffering but determined believers.

Such an aesthetic has consequences beyond simply the depiction of group protagonists or the cinematic representation of the Mormon com-
In this weather-swept scene in *Legacy*, the Morley family wagon slides off the rain-soaked trail and into a swelling river. The scene affirms the Mormon pioneer ethic as others rush in to help. The wagon falling was an accident, but the actors stayed in character long enough that this unscripted event became one of the most effective scenes in the film. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

...Covenants, shared suffering, and a cooperative spirit bind Latter-day Saints across places and time periods, unifying them, as in the Pauline “body of Christ” imagery, and also making possible the creation of Zion—and of enterprises contributing to that ideal civilization, including the arts. Invoking the Mormon communal ideal while urging Church youth toward literary accomplishment, Orson Whitney claimed that Zion would be “as famed for intelligence and culture as for purity, truth and beauty.”

“[Joseph Smith] knew that his people must progress, that their destiny demanded it; that culture is the duty of man, as intelligence is the glory of God.” Because of the popular nature and the collaboration required in creating film, it could be that this medium is even more appropriate than literature as an artistic, spiritual, and unifying means contributing to the creation of Mormon Zionistic community.

While filmmaking is always a collaborative enterprise, individual actors or directors often gain celebrity or become the driving interest in or force behind movies. In film, an *auteur* is a director who puts his or her creative stamp upon a body of work, using a sequence of films to work out his or her special vision of the world. Like a featured movie star, the *auteur* is the featured creator. The arts have long idealized the individual genius...
of authors, painters, actors, and even filmmakers. An aesthetic based in the body of Christ would resist temptations to individual celebrity. One could make a case that Church films like Legacy are more authentic than independent Mormon movies—not just because of their official sponsorship and oversight of story-line elements, but because they are created by a largely uncredited group of Latter-day Saints. 53

This claim may be idealistic, as the Church has paid its filmmakers and often used nonmember cast and crew, yet films such as Legacy demonstrate how individuals (whether characters in the drama or members of the film crew) are engulfed by the larger purpose of the Church. Star-driven narratives do not effectively communicate the Church’s purposes for film, which include an active looking to its past to faithfully energize its future purpose and ongoing story. Eliza’s lapse from the central focus of Legacy makes the best sense if a dramatic structure is avoided where the protagonist’s goals or struggles take precedence over the Church’s collective and ongoing forward movement.

That movement is bodied forth visually in Legacy by the migration scenes. Perhaps, instead of Schrader’s concept of the “everyday,” the episodic rise-and-fall pattern of the Mormons’ communal westward movement signals the communal and eternally progressive identity of the Latter-day Saints. The wagon train montage sequences suggest that all of this cannot end with one individual’s story. If there were some significant climax and resolution, as in the Hollywood style, the spiritual legacy would conclude. But that is not how Legacy ends, if it ends at all. It communicates that the legacy of the Saints must carry on until their spiritual covenant with Christ is fulfilled. Legacy shows that collective historical events take precedence over character-driven stories.

The building of the Nauvoo Temple also functions as a visual anchoring point in Legacy as much as the westbound wagon trains, and its centrality to the film is parallel to the centrality of temples in LDS belief. These are the sites of transcendence for Latter-day Saints, but they are also figurative altars of sacrifice. As the Nauvoo Temple and then the Salt Lake Temple exemplify in Legacy, the Saints find purpose, identity, and social bonding through their communal efforts to build and then worship in their temples. Rather than understanding the temple scenes as mere historical backdrops, Legacy suggests that temple building and community building are identical enterprises. This, too, has an aesthetic correlative to cinema.

A film is called into being by a cooperative effort, Erwin Panofsky points out, and is therefore “the nearest modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral.” 54 The roles of film personnel correspond, more or less, to those overseeing and accomplishing the erection of a cathedral—bishop, archi-
tect, and so forth, down to the lowliest mason working on the cathedral. “And if you speak to any one of these collaborators he will tell you, with perfect bona fides, that his is really the most important job—which is quite true to the extent that it is indispensable.” Cathedrals—as well as temples, chapels, or the edifice that is a finished film—are structures unlike almost any other art form, with the individual and the group collectively fulfilling and supporting one another while sharing the creative authorial process.

A film of this communal nature is ideally suited to create community between its creators and viewers. The act of embodiment that is art not only compares to but can directly lead to the spiritual sociality understood as the body of Christ. In secular terms, we already understand how readily fans of a given movie quickly establish fellowship with each other. The “cult” film phenomenon is a social one in which fellow fans return to a familiar work to once again enjoy this in the company of others who also appreciate it. The word “cult” derives from cultus, meaning “worship,” suggesting a strongly spiritual and social dimension to even very secular films. There can be a binding force among those viewing or creating films, and this religious dimension is all the stronger if those viewing or creating the film share religious beliefs or covenants of service and sacrifice. Peter Fraser calls attention to the spiritual and communal potential for film and suggests a sacramental mode for movies. The sacrament ordinance memorializing Christ’s body is done with fellow believers. It is communion both with God and with the other members of the body of Christ. If the making of a film can be compared to the construction of a cathedral or temple, then the viewing of a film, Fraser suggests, can be compared to partaking of the sacrament emblems, the ritual that reaffirms the community of faith.

Considering Legacy in this light, the movie both depicts and potentially enacts community. In its creation, in its subject matter, and among those viewing it, a social and spiritual connection can exist for those who take the opportunity to reflect on the offering made (as with Christians participating in the communion ritual). Those creating or viewing a film need never consider themselves as part of a body of believers, of course, but they can; Legacy invites such connections in its content and style. A sacramental approach to experiencing film is described by Edward McNulty, a Christian who teaches film and theology seminars. He urges people to “enter the theater with the same attitude or spiritual preparation that they enter a church sanctuary.” He even suggests praying before and after the film. Consistent with the idea that a film can be the result of significant communal effort, he recommends that one “look for some sign or symbol that the same Spirit involved in the process of making the film will also speak to the hearts and minds of the audience as well.” If
a film is seen as something consecrated, rather than commercial, it opens viewers to communion with its creators; if seen as something of potential spiritual value, rather than purely as entertainment, it opens viewers to communion with other viewers. To this end, McNulty also recommends attending a film with someone else, “even better, a church group, so that they can share with and enlighten one another concerning what they have experienced. . . . ‘All of us will see more than one of us.’”

With respect to *Legacy*, the “all of us” includes fellow Latter-day Saints who see or have seen the film and who embrace the legacy it portrays. Even the very exhibition space where *Legacy* premiered promotes the idea of communion. Temple Square is itself a monument to the Mormon people, connecting visitors to the sacrifices and commitment of the pioneers who erected its granite temple. Though clearly set up to proselytize to nonmembers, Temple Square has always functioned as a site of pilgrimage for members. The viewing of its films and exhibits completes that pilgrimage, connecting returning members not just to the early Latter-day Saints but to their prior experiences in this familiar place and to all the others finding something of significance there. The grandeur of *Legacy’s* aesthetic is found not just in its panoramic scenes or its IMAX-like screen in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building, but in its position within the traditions and history of Mormon culture. Families and Church groups traveled en masse to Salt Lake City to see this film together, just as other Mormon pilgrims have come to celebrate a kind of communion with their people, present and past, when attending general conference there, viewing the square’s Christmas lights, or attending its various events.

The Legacy Theater no longer shows *Legacy*, though it did so daily for six years. Like the Mormons it portrayed in the film, it has moved on, making room first for *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000) and now *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration* (2005). Films can be made sacred in their creation or consumption, but like the questing Mormons of *Legacy*, they are always in motion, they are “cinematic” (from the Greek *kinema*, meaning “movement”). As the early Mormons relocated in the 1830s and 1840s, they did not simply change their location or increase their numbers; they evolved the various physical, organizational, and social forms that have successively embodied the LDS faith. Mormon aesthetics will continue emerging, project by project, and will change their form. But just as the Mormon people do in *Legacy*, the Mormon artistic tradition will keep its character if it continues to connect itself to the body of Saints past and present, edifying the full body of Christ.

Like other aesthetics, filmmaking based on the concept of the body of Christ will have limits, but it has the virtue of being grounded at the
core of LDS belief and in the ordinances, eternal social connections, and
divine places that are most resonant with Latter-day Saints. Bodies grow
and develop, and so will Mormon film methods. Mortal bodies are imper-
fect, but by joining together as a Christian body, those imperfections are
transcended, making place for the divine. Perhaps this transcendent style
is not what Schrader describes but is instead the transcendence of the indi-
vidual within the suffering and sanctifying body of the Saints. Legacy’s
legacy is that Latter-day Saints do find their God and approach Zion as
they make sacrifices, unite themselves, and work together. They thereby
build something greater than the temporary temples they must soon
abandon; they build a people. As LDS filmmakers and viewers move away
from entertainment or business as their primary paradigm for film and
consider the artistic implications of their own theology, they will discover
and evolve ever better means to simultaneously express and realize their
spiritual aspirations as fellow Saints in the latter days.

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1. See, for example, Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds., Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995). However, neither this nor the majority of other studies explore the deeper implications of cinematic style. Even when the Journal of Popular Film and Television dedicated an entire issue to “The Catholic Imagination in Popular Film and Television” (19, no. 2 [Summer 1991]), the articles focused on thematic rather than stylistic approaches.

2. In studies of religion and film, the “Jesus Film” is a well-established genre going back to Alice Guy’s Jésus devant Pilate (1898) and including such well-
known feature films as Quo Vadis (1912); Intolerance (1916); Ben Hur (1925, 1959); King of Kings (1927, 1961); The Robe (1953); The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964); The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965); Jesus Christ, Superstar (1973); Jesus of Nazareth (1977); The Last Temptation of Christ (1988); and Mel Gibson’s recent The Passion of the Christ (2004).


9. “The conception of a film, according to anyone’s common-sense definition, corresponds to that which was developed in Hollywood by the middle of the First World War.” John Ellis, Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video (New York: Routledge, 1992), 194.

10. In different settings, other cinematic norms have held sway, such as during World War II when documentary film (newsreels, propaganda films, and so forth) temporarily had cultural dominance.

11. An Edison ad of 1898–99 asserted that Edison’s Projectoscope presented “pictures so natural that life itself is no more real.” They were “so true to life as to force the observer to believe that they are viewing the reality and not the reproduction.” Quoted in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 100.


16. Peter Fraser, Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 173.


18. Although critics continue to compare Schrader’s own style to the transcendental style, he claims his films contrast with it: “I’m quite different from Bresson. The reason why I don’t make transcendental films, the reason I don’t have transcendental style, is that I believe in something that is anathema or contrary to the whole notion of transcendental cinema. I have my roots in psychological realism and audience identification with character, whereas the whole notion of transcendental style is based on repudiating psychological realism.” Michael Bliss

34. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 70.
36. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 44.
37. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 82.
38. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 78.
42. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 49.
43. Fraser, *Images of the Passion*, 173.
44. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 22.
46. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 68.
47. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 69.
53. Randy Astle describes a similar communal aesthetic in Angie and other films of Dean Duncan’s Fit for the Kingdom series. These honor those “of the last wagon” (quoting J. Reuben Clark’s famous discourse) in their “portraits of average yet remarkable Latter-day Saints.” Astle says these films represent “not just a single film or even a type or style of film, but a mosaic of films. Each individual piece interlocks with, then complements and balances the others. They are short enough and sparse enough that no individual title can give a complete perspective of its subject’s life, but together the films can and do allow just such a comprehensive glimpse inside modern Mormonism in its totality. . . . Angie, therefore, calls attention to the beauty of the entire body of the Saints, of Emanuel and Loya and Heather and the others—of each one of us.” Randy Astle, review of Angie, in this issue, BYU Studies 46, no. 2 (2007): 324–30.


55. Panofsky, Three Essays on Style, 119.

56. A film set can be a place where a director plays dictator, or it can be a place where sacrifice and consecration make the resulting film a sacred endeavor. Brigham Young University professor Tom Russell directed a film, Mr. Dung-beetle (2005), during the last months of his wife’s life. Despite her failing health she wished for her husband to complete the film, which he could not have done without her support and others’ contributions and commitment. Reportedly, this working and suffering together created a closeness among cast and crew; it gave the film a greater purpose.

57. See Fraser, Images of the Passion, for a treatment of the liturgical and ritual functions of cinema within the “sacramental mode in film.”


59. McNulty, “Spirituality and Film.”

60. McNulty, “Spirituality and Film.”


Reviewed by Brian Q. Cannon
Commented on by Mario S. De Pillis and Richard E. Bennett

Brian Q. Cannon:

Producer Helen Whitney described her goal in producing The Mormons as communicating “the defining ideas and themes and events in Mormon history that would help outsiders go inside the church.” The first half of the four-hour documentary discusses the prophetic calling and career of Joseph Smith; the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; the Latter-day Saint saga in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois; and the exodus to Utah. These topics comprise just over half of the script for part 1. The balance of part 1 focuses exclusively upon two perennially fascinating facets of Mormon history: the Mountain Meadows Massacre and the origins, practice, and legacy of polygamy. Equally significant but less familiar aspects of Mormon history in the nineteenth-century West, including colonization and settlement, Mormon-Indian relations, and cooperative economic policies, are not discussed.

Part 2 telescopes the Church’s history in the twentieth century into a handful of vignettes, offering only glimpses of the Church’s past one hundred years. The “Great Accommodation,” or the Church’s embrace of monogamy, political pluralism, capitalism, and American nationalism at the turn of the nineteenth century, is largely told through the lens of the Reed Smoot hearings. The Tabernacle Choir and clean-shaven David O. McKay in his white double-breasted suit are introduced briefly as additional emblems of the new Mormon image as assimilated Americans. The denial of the priesthood to blacks, the development of independent Mormon congregations in Ghana, and the June 1978 revelation on the priesthood are described in the context of the Church’s continuing Americanization. The balance of part 2 focuses on elements of contemporary Mormonism and controversial issues facing the Church: humanitarian aid, missionary work, the family, the temple, and genealogy all receive
attention, as do dissent and excommunication, gender roles, feminism, and homosexuality. Even a four-hour documentary cannot discuss everything: the Word of Wisdom, the Church’s auxiliaries, the rise of correlation, and the Church’s educational system are not discussed. The Church’s expansion internationally is mentioned only as it pertains to Ghana. Likewise, core doctrines including priesthood, the Godhead, belief in the Bible, and the relationship between faith and works are neglected.

Whitney’s cast of talking heads includes General Authorities, active lay members, lapsed Mormons, and outside observers, including scholars. Despite significant omissions in the cast—nearly all reside in the United States and Canada and just under 25 percent are women—the talking heads do represent a broad array of viewpoints. About half of the interviewees in the documentary are active Latter-day Saints, approximately one-fourth are lapsed Mormons, four are fundamentalist polygamists, and the remainder are non-LDS.2

As a safeguard against error, historians try to corroborate the information in any source, including interviews, with data from other sources. Unfortunately, The Mormons gets some of the historical details wrong because of its heavy reliance on interviews. Some errors are minor, such as Terryl Givens’s inflated claim that “we have literally hundreds of accounts of eyewitnesses who heard rushing of wind and heard angelic choirs” in the three months surrounding the dedication of the Kirtland Temple.3 Historians have identified only a few dozen eyewitness accounts. Other errors, like Judith Freeman’s description of her ancestor Prudence Karchner’s plural marriage, have more consequential implications. Freeman’s inaccurate recounting unintentionally marginalizes women by ignoring the agency wives exercised and the roles they played in decisions regarding polygamy. Illustrating the difficulties of plural marriage for women, Freeman says, “It was so full of heartbreak, just heart-wrenching moments in advance, when a husband came home and said to his wife, ‘Emma, the bishop has said that I have to take another wife, and I have my eye on Prudence. She is sixteen years old. Prudence Karchner. And you know her. We’ve grown up with her in the community. And the bishop has said that I’m to take her for a wife.’ And this is exactly what happened to my great-grandfather. . . . She [the first wife] was thirty. That sixteen-year-old girl was my great-grandmother.” There may have been instances like the one Freeman describes, but they were atypical, and Prudence Karchner’s marriage was not one of them. Karchner did marry William Jordan Flake as his second wife, but under different circumstances. She was eighteen years old at the time, rather than sixteen, and the first wife’s name was Lucy White Flake rather than Emma. The bishop did not require William to take a second
wife. Lucy’s autobiography indicates, “There was no compulsion to entering into it.” Nor did William summarily announce his intention to Lucy. Rather, Lucy and William jointly agreed to embrace plural marriage out of religious convictions, after reflection and prayer. Lucy recalled, “I knew without my consent William would not and could not take another wife.” Months later, the marriage was performed and Lucy wrote in her diary, “Sister E. R. Snow asked me was I willing. Said yes. She asked do you think you can live in that principal. I said am quite willing to try. My Mother and sister live in it and I think [I] can do as I was willing.”

Thanks to the diversity of those interviewed in the documentary, viewers learn about Mormonism from conflicting perspectives and are implicitly invited to arrive at their own conclusions. For instance, neuro-radiologist Anne Osborne Poelman appears on the screen stating that “as a woman in the Mormon Church, I feel very comfortable. I don’t feel denied any opportunity to serve and to do good for people in the Church and in the ward and in our neighborhood, and so on.” She is followed by historian James Clayton who asserts that Church leaders opposed the Equal Rights Amendment because it would permit each Mormon woman
to “make . . . decisions [regarding her roles as wife and mother] for herself.” Similarly, two General Authorities bear witness of the First Vision, while Yale archaeologist Michael Coe asserts that Joseph Smith “started out faking it.”

Despite the advantages of crosscutting between interviews to tell the story of Mormonism from a variety of perspectives, the film’s reliance upon multiple interviews occasionally breaks up the narrative, omits key details, and fosters confusion. Such is the case in the film’s coverage of a speech that Elder Boyd K. Packer delivered to the All-Church Coordinating Council in 1993. Gail Houston, a professor who was not present when the speech was given, introduces viewers to the topic, indicating that Packer “basically said one of the greatest dangers to the Church were gays, feminists, and intellectuals.” The camera then shifts to an interview with President Packer. We do not hear the interviewer’s question, so we do not know whether the interviewer used Houston’s paraphrase or not. We only hear his answer: “I suppose—I think I remember saying those things. If it’s in print, I said it.” Nowhere in the documentary do we hear what Packer
actually said in his speech. The printed version of the speech demonstrates that it was more sensitive and moderate than Houston’s paraphrase. The Apostle cautioned that there are three “areas where members of the Church, influenced by social and political unrest, are being caught up and led away.” He did not say that homosexuals, feminists, or intellectuals endangered the Church but focused instead upon the salvation of individual members who were drawn to those movements. He advised leaders to minister to these members’ concerns sensitively on an individual basis, teach them the “plan of redemption,” and help them to envision their circumstances in an eternal perspective.  

In discussing the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the film’s reliance upon multiple interviews also invites confusion. Whitney ably uses excerpts from several interviews to establish the indirect causes of the Mountain Meadows Massacre: drought, the zealotry of the Mormon reformation, fear of Johnston’s Army, the murder of Parley P. Pratt in Arkansas, the yearning to avenge the blood shed at both Carthage and Haun’s Mill, and Brigham Young’s military alliance with Indians. But none of the excerpts included in the documentary explains the direct causes of the massacre. The Cedar City leaders are suddenly deciding to “take some cattle, using the Indians, ‘And by the way, if some of those bad guys are killed, we won’t truly be sorry.” No motive for the killing aside from these opaque references to cattle and the behavior of “bad guys” is mentioned. What did the “bad guys” do that so enraged the Cedar City Mormons? Further complicating the picture, the documentary does not mention differences of opinion among the Cedar City Mormons over how to respond to the emigrants, the people’s appeal to Brigham Young for advice, and Young’s response in which he advised the Mormons, “You must not meddle with [the emigration trains].” Instead, without providing sufficient background for understanding the reasoning behind either historian’s conclusions, the documentary merely shows Will Bagley claiming that the massacre was “ordered from the very top” and Glen Leonard averring that Brigham Young “didn’t order it.”

Occasionally Whitney abandons her practice of allowing viewers to judge for themselves between competing perspectives and instead nudges the viewer through her editorial decisions. For instance, the documentary shows archaeologist Michael Coe claiming that Mormon excavations in Central America have “never found anything that would back it [the Book of Mormon] up.” Whitney fails to balance Coe’s assertion with any rebuttal from Mormon researchers. Instead, one must consult the documentary website in order to find the transcript of Whitney’s interview with Daniel Peterson in which he says, “We do have evidence of those civilizations. . . .
We just don’t have much inscrptional evidence from the Preclassic Period of Mesoamerica. I would argue, though, that some of the chronology, as we’re beginning to understand it, of Mesoamerica matches in outline broadly the chronology of the Book of Mormon, and that’s very striking.” Similarly, the documentary includes footage from interviews with three authors who have written extensively about Mountain Meadows, novelist Judith Freeman and historians Will Bagley and Glen Leonard. But the producer seems to favor some views over others: the comments by Leonard, coauthor of a Church-commissioned manuscript on the massacre, tally only 160 words, whereas Freeman relates her views in 374 words and Bagley in 476 words.

If Whitney gives more orthodox positions short shrift in her coverage of some topics, her coverage of other topics favors the Church and its members by omitting countervailing evidence. For instance, describing the Mormon War in Missouri in 1838, the documentary indicates that Mormons retaliated against Missouri mobs by forcing some Missourians from their homes, but the only atrocity the documentary describes in detail is the slaughter of seventeen Latter-day Saints at Haun’s Mill. Incendiary speeches by Sidney Rigdon, including his July 4, 1838, oration in which he threatened that the Mormons would exterminate Missourians, are not mentioned, making Governor Boggs’s Extermination Order seem almost entirely unprovoked.

Part of what makes The Mormons appealing despite its flaws is the engaging stories it relates. Many of the most memorable vignettes focus upon the religious experiences of individual Latter-day Saints. Trevor Southey wistfully recounts his quixotic quest to reconcile his homosexuality with his yearnings for celestial glory and an idyllic home and family. Betty Stevenson, a plainspoken convert, powerfully describes the appeal of the Gospel for the down-and-out. It is a “message of hope, of family that could be together forever, of raising my children and learning how to be a good parent, not drinking, not smoking, not cussing every word, using the Lord’s name in vain.” Elder Marlin K. Jensen describes his spiritual awakening as a young missionary in Germany, “when my hope and my tender belief turned into something really solid, which has been the foundation for the rest of my life.” These intimate stories convey the impact of Mormonism upon individual lives. In these accounts of formative experiences, what actually happened is less important to the individuals involved than their understanding and perception of what happened. Thus, in many ways these personal reflections lie beyond historical methods of verification.

On the other hand, stories about the collective Mormon past, culled from folklore or documents and related in the documentary by individuals
who did not experience the events personally, are more susceptible to evidentiary tests employed by historians; some of the most delightful ones fail those tests. One example is the film’s fanciful tale of the Mormon migration. Documentary filmmaker Ken Verdoia taps into Mormon folklore in describing the pioneers’ arrival in the Salt Lake Valley. “In Brigham’s eyes he looked and he saw a desert. ‘This is the right place. Drive on.’ It is one of those very rare moments where people literally are gathered around Brigham and saying, ‘Are you serious? I have been in that wagon for 60 days. I’d gladly do another 60 just to get to a better place than this.’” The story is dramatic and appealing because it entails sacrifice, prophetic insight defying reality, and faith in the paradoxical ways of God. Yet the most reliable historical evidence undermines the story. Due to illness, Brigham Young entered the valley two days after most of his traveling companions. Members of his pioneer company wrote enthusiastically about the Salt Lake Valley, describing the valley as scenic, apparently fertile, healthful, and crisscrossed by numerous creeks and streams.7

Even some stories from the film that have derived from old documents are suspect: in recounting Joseph Smith’s First Vision, Daniel Peterson claims that Smith was “actually scared” when he saw a glorious and brilliant light descending toward him, because he expected that when the light “touched the trees, they would burst into flame.” Peterson’s emphasis on fear goes one step beyond Smith’s own surviving accounts, which only describe his “unspeakable joy” as light replaced the darkness. Although it is possible that Smith’s initial reaction to the pillar of fire was fear, followed by joy when he realized that the source of the light was good, caution is warranted because Peterson’s version of the story grows out of a second-hand account of the First Vision written and published by Orson Pratt in 1840 in Scotland.8

Other stories as told in the PBS production are also suspect because they involve historical inference, imputing motives, or implying consequences that go beyond the documents. This is the case with Will Bagley’s engaging tale of Brigham Young’s transformation on his sickbed in February 1847 from “self-doubt” to inspired self-assurance as a result of a dream. Brigham Young’s office files corroborate Bagley’s description of Young’s dream and indicate that it occurred on February 17. But the files do not sustain Bagley’s assertion that Young was worn down by gnawing self-doubt prior to the dream or his claim that the dream replaced doubt with certainty. In fact, over a month earlier, on January 14, Young had dictated “The Word and the Will of the Lord’ to the Camps of Israel,” and on January 17, he “addressed the Assembly showing that the church had been led by Revelation just as much since the death of Joseph Smith as before.”9
My reactions to The Mormons derive from my training as a historian. However, neither Whitney nor most of her informants are professional historians, and their methods of measuring truth claims differ from mine. As a filmmaker, Whitney plays more freely than most historians with metaphors and symbols. For instance, she uses scenes from the red rock country of southeastern Utah to illustrate the Saints’ arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, not because she thinks the Salt Lake Valley looks like Goblin Valley but because she believes red rock landscapes convey deeper emotional truths about the Great Basin in 1847. Similarly, novelist Judith Freeman’s description in the documentary of the psychological impact of the semi-arid desert landscape aims at impressionistic insight rather than documented fact: “You were living in fire, red, orange, yellow fiery land and rocks. Red, it’s like blood red. And when the wind blows, it creates a kind of excess, a zealotry. I think the very land itself infused people with a sense almost of doom that the end was nigh.” No discipline monopolizes truth, and the impressionistic insights of the filmmaker or novelist may be more satisfactory and valid in some situations than the historian’s exacting attention to the specifics of time, place, and documentary provenance.

Frustrated by those who insisted upon chipping away at the grand sweep and patterns he identified in his written work, the French Enlightenment era philosophe Voltaire quipped, “Confound details.”10 If one role of the historian is to remind storytellers that the past is not infinitely malleable, one role of the filmmaker as artist may be to juxtapose discordant elements from the past in fresh, creative ways. By showing viewers how rich, vibrant, and contested the Mormon experience is, Helen Whitney deserves praise despite the limitations of her sources and methods.

Filmmaker Helen Whitney attended the 2007 annual conference of the Mormon History Association in Salt Lake City on May 25, 2007, and fielded questions about her PBS documentary, The Mormons. After Whitney showed the “Dissenters and Exiles” portion of the film and gave introductory remarks to conference attendees, Dr. Mario S. De Pillis and then Dr. Richard E. Bennett presented the following responses, which have been edited for publication.

Mario S. De Pillis:

Let me say first of all that this is one of the best documentaries ever done on any American religion. It is fair to the Church, insightful on the role of persecution paranoia in Mormon history, shrewd in using Harold Bloom to disarm certain critics by noting that revelations in all religions
could be called superstitious, clever in using Ken Verdoia as Grand Interpreter and Terryl Givens as the explicator of Mormon doctrine, and extremely fortunate in getting the testimony of Elder Dallin H. Oaks.

I felt that there were three significant omissions: (1) details of temple worship (admittedly hard to get at), (2) the role of women, and (3) the enormous power of community in Mormonism.

Turning to the segment on dissenters and exiles. Most viewers I talked to—both Mormon and non-Mormon—were enthralled, perhaps stunned, by the passionate witness of Margaret Toscano. Toscano’s eloquence and her ruthless cogency diminished the talking heads all about her. Psychologically, the harrowing nature of excommunication is possible only because of the intensity of Mormon community, a community that extends to the afterlife, or, as Mormons say, “beyond the veil.” Thus, the Mormon community includes eternal salvation and eternal progression. The Church excluded Toscano from those blessings because of her public feminism.

While the Toscano sequence, along with the remarks of Elder Oaks, were stunningly informative, I wish to single out two moments in this sequence, both of which may speak to the central theme of the film. That theme, or more precisely, the premise of the film is “Why are the Mormons so weird?” That was the question raised in the prerelease advertisements. The film rightly assumes that all Americans are curious about the Mormons. The Mormons must be explained.

The first filmic moment that illustrates the explanatory premise is visual. In the Toscano sequence, we see a barren, ominous landscape of 1950s wooden chairs and tables. No persons are present, implying a nameless, cruel emptiness. For me the room evokes the set for Clarence Darrow at the Scopes Monkey Trial.

Mormons I’ve talked to find the scene offensive. The clear message of the empty courtroom is that Mormonism is an authoritarian, male-dominated religion that callously harms its adherents on issues of sex and gender identification, feminism, and free expression of scholarship. It implies that Mormonism needs to change immediately and alter its weirdness. The use of the late Beethoven quartets for the background music drove me up the wall, but that is another issue.

The second moment that illustrates my “why-are-they-weird?” theme is the historian Jon Butler commenting on the role of history among the Mormons. Butler says that the Mormons are afraid of confronting their history, which, he says, is “thrusting itself up in front of the Mormons day after day, almost hour after hour, and it’s difficult to deal with. And like much of the past, it’s very messy.”
Mormonism, he adds, “is a movement that celebrates its history, and yet seems to be quite afraid of its history, oftentimes afraid of real historical investigation. What did Joseph Smith think about the practice of magic? To what extent did Joseph Smith really practice money digging? To what extent did he forge documents? To what extent did he engage in illicit sexual behavior? . . . We want a kind of sanitized Mormon history.”

Now, the assertion that Mormons do not confront their history is a half-truth. Butler believes that the Mormons should distance themselves from their messy past, like good academic historians.

Yes, the Mormons do celebrate their history. But one must point out that Mormon historians also conscientiously try to confront the messy, uncomfortable aspects of their history—and not just in the newer works of Richard L. Bushman and Richard E. Turley.

So I conclude that Butler’s unstated thesis here is that the Mormons should emulate the Germans, who confronted their evil Nazi past and overcame it by rejecting it. The cliché among the German intelligentsia for some fifteen years was Überwältigung der Vergangenheit (conquering the past). So also must the Mormons confront their weird past, and, as Butler hopes, reject the messy parts of it. That is good liberal dogma, and I agree with its premise.

But, alas! The Mormons are not eager to become good Germans conquering their past—simply because much of their allegedly strange and messy past is connected with core beliefs.

If Mormons are asked to countenance a picture of Joseph Smith as a deeply, deeply flawed prophet, it is tantamount, in my opinion, to asking them to discount the Book of Mormon and the revelations. In short, the Mormon historian cannot so easily saunter down Jon Butler’s academic road.

So I feel that the legitimate assumption of the film, namely that the peculiarities of the Mormons have to be explained to the American people, has led the filmmaker to a corollary: that the Church should abandon its stance of extreme control from the top. The film shows that the Mormon system of control can be used for noble ends like welfare work for the poor, the Church’s remarkable operation to help the victims of Katrina and other natural disasters, the miraculous feat of crossing the plains and building Zion, and so on.

But there is a downside to central control, and the film emphasizes its cruel and painful cost in the lives of dissidents like Toscano. Thus the film aims to persuade the viewer that the Church should liberalize its strange beliefs and oppressive practices.

In short, if we return to that forbidding courtroom, I conclude that the film wants those empty chairs to be occupied by nondogmatic humans,
half of whom are female and one-tenth of whom are homosexuals. . . . Do you think this will happen?

Richard E. Bennett:

There are several commendable things to say in defense of Helen Whitney’s new PBS documentary entitled *The Mormons*. One is that it may represent how many view “the Mormons” and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—an external perspective and barometer of current American opinion that may be as instructive as it is difficult for some to accept. Many of my friends outside of the Church have told me how much they liked this piece. And, although likely a public relations nightmare for the Church, it may have served as a wake-up call. If Latter-day Saints want to tell their own history more credibly, they must take the more inclusive view of all their history and not merely practice selective memory. If, as has been said, one of the great achievements of the Church in the twentieth century was to live down its nine- teenth-century past, in this day of research, the Internet, and mass media attention, we must live up to it and take it in all its ups and downs, divisions and difficulties. That Whitney’s presentation touched a sensitive nerve is obvious from the surprisingly frank recent *Church News* article saying that because of the interest generated by Whitney’s work, the *Church News* will embark on a “series of occasional articles in which troubling questions and adversarial criticisms against the faith” will be addressed. We can only hope that this will be the case.

These pluses notwithstanding, I believe *The Mormons* missed an opportunity to be fair, balanced, and accurate, particularly in its portrayal of the history of intellectualism, intellectual debate, and dissent within the Church. I have several criticisms. First is the definition of terms. I quote: “To be a Mormon intellectual means that you are opening up yourself to being called into a Church court.” Really? Just what constitutes a Mormon intellectual anyway, may I ask? Who decides who is one? And how is it that the term “Mormon intellectual” has become an appealing synonym for Mormon dissent? Dissenters are a faction and a fraction of the many gifted Mormon thinkers and writers. As one observer elsewhere put it, the intellectual dissenters are “a rather narrow mutual-admiration society” who feel that “if only the benighted ‘average’ Mormon and the well-meaning but narrow-minded Church authorities would acknowledge the clear intellectual superiority of the experts and freethinkers, then the path to future progress would be open.”

I also take exception with the sense of inevitable confrontation and imbalance. Whitney makes intellectual confrontation appear unavoidable,
when in fact it has not been so for a great many of us. Are the “Mormons” to be defined intellectually by the few dissidents who have left the Church or by the many other intelligent and highly educated Latter-day Saints who remain confident and committed in their religious views?

A page from Church history may be illustrative. Just as there was minority dissent at the time of Wilford Woodruff’s Manifesto, and some even in high places left the Church, thereby giving rise, as Carmon Hardy has rightly observed, to modern Mormon fundamentalism, so there was majority if not overwhelming acceptance of and obedience to the new directive. Why stay focused on the 2 percent to the neglect of the 98 percent? While it is acceptable to study the causes of dissent and the plight of those now out of the Church, it is incumbent that historians highlight the many who followed Woodruff in 1890 and the many others who continue faithful today through modern challenges.

I readily admit that there are areas of ambiguity. In the packaging of the message for a worldwide audience, there is repetition, sameness, and more standardization than some of us would like to see. In the ongoing essential effort of Church leaders to “keep the doctrine pure,” some intellectuals may feel left out and ostracized, their deep and meaningful questions not addressed adequately. Church curriculum does not satisfy everyone’s needs, nor is Church “correlation” everyone’s favorite word. Our history need not be “sanitized,” and opportunities must exist for more advanced discussions of difficult issues. The Mormon community cannot afford the closing of the Mormon mind any more than it can tolerate irresponsible criticism.

Another misunderstanding in the documentary is the “them versus us” concept, the gulf between ordinary members and the austere, high-level Church leadership who, as was said, are supposedly keeping files on many of us and are trying to control the message and the members. The truth is, the ordinary members take responsibility for running this Church. A characteristic of Mormonism is that it is constantly rejuvenating itself through the miracle of lay leadership and humble discipleship. Although the public face of the Church may indeed be Gordon B. Hinckley, it is at the local level where men and women on their own time and expense make the everyday decisions that affect us all. To my knowledge, this is a phenomenon not seen in any other church. In my imperfect arithmetic, I count some 340 mission presidents, 2,700 stake presidents, 27,000 bishops and branch presidents, 33,000 high councilors, 90,000 female Relief Society presidents and their counselors, 250,000 youth leaders, and upwards of half a million teachers, all serving at any one time and without remuneration. These callings are constantly in flux and their places
rotate so that over just a very few years, literally millions are serving. They do so happily, willingly, humbly, and teachably. They love the Church and recognize the power for good it brings into their lives and the lives of their family members. They don’t shun intellectual debate but are too busy making the Church work to worry about it.

Another criticism is perspective, especially in regard to Church discipline. Occasionally there must be discipline, especially when apostasy or fighting against the Church and its teachings is at stake. As a former stake leader, I have presided over several Church disciplinary councils. However, rather than being embarrassing punishments for nonconformity, they are invitations to repentance. The Church has a right to protect itself, its membership, and its teachings; and while we, as local, unpaid, and unprofessional Church leaders may stumble occasionally in our procedures, Church courts are not meant to be “vicious niceties” but opportunities for personal growth and recommitment.

Missing also in the documentary is any mention of our long-established historical tradition of educational excellence that goes as far back as the exodus, the many thousands of Latter-day Saints who pursue higher educational research and debate in the sciences, arts, and social sciences at
Brigham Young University and other centers of higher learning around the world. There are probably more Mormons with college degrees per capita than most any other religion. They are not on a collision course with intellectual pursuits; rather, they welcome, encourage, and pursue advanced academic research in a thousand and one fields. The inquiring mind does not surrender itself at the gate of baptism. Conversion does not negate questioning, for it stems from such and encourages it. Indeed, the freedom and encouragement to ask the great questions has ever been a hallmark of Mormonism. It began, after all, with a questioning, young teenage boy. It continued in 1978 with President Spencer W. Kimball’s courageous questioning of past policies on the priesthood. “Ask, and ye shall receive” (D&C 88:63) is as true in 2007 as it was in 1820. The key is to ask in faith, not critiquing negatively but questioning positively.

My one final criticism pertains to the underlying theme of blind or controlled obedience and fanatic, unthinking allegiance to the Church and its principal leaders; that the extreme, if not militant, devotion of Mountain Meadows is still alive in those who, if asked today, would blow themselves up in the cause of missionary service. Missing here is the dominant dimension that most Mormons are “peaceable followers of Christ”: at peace with their faith in God, at peace with their leaders, and at peace with their fellowmen. Are we still to be judged by the wartime hysteria and raw frontier mentality of those disreputable few who disgraced themselves at Mountain Meadows? Must Catholics ever be judged by their terrible inquisitions, Protestants by their medieval pogroms, Christianity by the Crusades, Muslims by their extremist terrorists, or Marines by their My Lai massacre of 1968? The parking lots of modern Church meetinghouses are filled every Sunday and on many weeknights not by constraint but by devotion, not by zealous fanaticism but by quiet faith.

To conclude, I suggest that Mormonism’s rise in growth and influence is not because it shuns or dismisses intellectual discourse or debate but rather because it seeks to engage with them. And as to the writing of Church history, it was said as a blanket statement in the documentary that “when Mormon scholars challenge their church’s official history, they risk serious sanctions.” Perhaps for some, but not for many of us. What constitutes our official history is still being hammered out. As academic editor of BYU Studies, I see almost every day evidences of those questioning, probing, analyzing, and expanding the borders of our own understanding.

As for me, I can only say that I have ever been encouraged in my research and writing. Not long ago I published a serious article on, of all topics, temple work and on the beginning of endowments for the dead, and I did so without recrimination or suspicion but with encouragement.
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and support. My experience has led me to conclude that the principles of modern revelation, lay leadership, an amazing adaptability to change, a continuing soft underbelly of practical religion, a recurring optimistic message that man is a literal child of God—these and more are the profound issues that continue to define “the Mormons.” The strength and very identity of the Church from its beginning is written large on the backs and in the wagons, in the fields and in the libraries, and in the homes and in the lives of those Latter-day Saints who have overcome “by study and by faith” (D&C 88:118), by repentance and by covenant, and that quiet desire to know “the truth of all things” (Moro. 10:5).

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11. Margaret Toscano was interviewed primarily during the “Dissenters and Exiles” portion of *The Mormons*, where she describes her excommunication from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.


There’s a tremendous spirit at the bottom of the New York Dolls. There are three living New York Dolls and three dead New York Dolls. The people who are dead, they are with us in spirit somehow. This is like me being in the family history center.

—Arthur “Killer” Kane, bassist, New York Dolls

One day back in the early 1970s when, as the story goes, old fashioned rock and roll was dying a slow, boring death-by-interminable-drum-solo, a band called the New York Dolls changed everything. Offering a sneering, irreverent mix of high-energy rock-and-roll and cross-dress chic, the band grabbed the attention of alienated youth, aspiring musicians, and curious critics. A quintessential live-hard-die-hard act, the drug-induced death of a band member plus internal disputes frightened off major record labels and precipitated the group’s disintegration. Before the implosion, however, future musicians of such key punk and new wave acts as Blondie, Generation X, the Sex Pistols, Morrissey, Iggy Pop, The Damned, and The Clash, plus the entire Glam Metal scene found early inspiration in the Dolls’ style and sound. It can be argued that all of punk rock and hence all contemporary rock-and-roll owe something of a debt to the fast-living Dolls.

In the years following the breakup, the band’s mystique grew alongside each individual member’s personal misery. In the late 1980s, two former members met substance-abuse related deaths. With a reunion of the band increasingly unlikely, and having reached rock-bottom himself, in the late 1980s bassist Arthur Kane attempted to follow the path of his three late mates. Instead he met the missionaries. Two bishops and a home teacher later, plus a calling to the family history center at the Los Angeles Temple, and “Killer” Kane had found peace and a new sense of purpose. Making copies and looking up records for his senior missionary co-workers, the bassist who had once rocked Wembley Stadium had found something else
to live for besides a New York Dolls reunion. And then, suddenly, in early 2004 a series of e-mails hinted that Kane's rock-and-roll career was perhaps not entirely over.

Enter the camera of BYU film program graduate Greg Whiteley. Starting on the day that Kane, in the company of film crew and home teacher, returns to a local L.A. pawn shop to retrieve his guitars (using money lent by local ward members), Whiteley documents the history of Kane and the Dolls wrapped around a forthcoming Dolls reunion in New York City and concert in London's Royal Festival Hall. For the rock novitiate, Whiteley walks us through the history of rock-and-roll mixing footage of early Dolls shows with interviews of industry legends Morrissey (The Smiths), Chrissy Hynde (The Pretenders), Sir Bob Geldof (The Boomtown Rats, BandAid, LiveAid), Iggy Pop, Mick Jones (The Clash), and many others. For rock-and-rollers who may never have darkened the door of a church, let alone an LDS meetinghouse, Whiteley offers interviews with Kane's bishops, home teacher, and co-workers at the Family History Center. Couched quixotically in the seam of these two worlds is Kane himself, dressed in white shirt, dark tie, and missionary nametag while he recalls his rock-and-roll days as his “fondest memory,” something he is unable to “put . . . away.” Formally joined with Kane in the interstices of the two worlds is the bassist’s ex-wife who Whiteley films reading from the Book of Mormon, Mor- non 9:21, “Behold, I say unto you that whoso believeth in Christ, doubting nothing, whatsoever he shall ask the Father in the name of Christ it shall be granted him.” Read to him during a home teaching visit, as Kane’s former bishop recalls, Kane took the promise to heart and began praying. For a New York Dolls reunion.

Which then, of course, comes to pass.

And suddenly, the humble family history worker, who reports to fans after a concert that he is “expected back” at his “understaffed” library, becomes, in answer to prayer, once again a front-lining rock star.

And therein lays the fun and indeed, the power, of Whiteley’s documentary. An engaging blend of homage to rock-and-roll and real-life testimony meeting, the story that Whiteley tells ends up being (without spoiling the ending) quite remarkable if not simply miraculous. Great, even wondrous, things happen to those who pray and play. But perhaps the real power of Whiteley’s film, at least for an LDS audience, is that, as remarkable and even miraculous as Kane’s story is, it is ultimately experienced as something quite familiar. This is not meant to discount the beauty of Kane’s experience, nor the quality of Whiteley’s storytelling. To the contrary. Indeed, what Whiteley captures ultimately is the simple normalcy and regularity of a world in which miracles have not ceased. As I
watched the film, I couldn’t help thinking that as fantastic as Kane’s experience is, the feelings it evoked and the thoughts it recalled were those of so many testimony meetings I have experienced in so many congregations over the course of my life. Note that I speak of testimony meetings and not merely testimonies. For, Whiteley’s direction converts Kane’s story into more than merely Kane’s own testimony. Certainly, the bishops, the home teacher, and the fellow Family History Center workers each add in their own way their claims of belief and faith. But perhaps most remarkable, at least for this child of the eighties, is how the idolized rockers of my youth manifest their own versions of faith, hope, and charity towards the rather different life of a once and future fellow traveler. All of this is carried out, thankfully, with appropriate subtlety. This is not a “faith promoting film.” But it is a film that, in portraying the honest story of an honest man surrounded by honest people, cannot help but ultimately sustain, support, and, indeed, promote faith.

This is, in short, a story for people interested in how the gospel works outside the norms that often we associate with LDS living. It offers a vision of being in but not of the world that may not feel quite comfortable for some but has a sense of reality coursing through it. Kane’s world, and Whiteley’s film, is a place where an answer to prayer is described as “an LSD trip from the Lord” and where rock stars hope to “convey a Joseph Smith kind of image” on stage. Perhaps unusual but hardly unreal. As Whiteley’s camera and Kane’s story document, gospel living and teaching go on everyday in all sorts of places. Bassists can and do teach irreverent chain-smoking lead singers about the law of tithing and the Word of Wisdom backstage and then lead band and roadies in prayer before running before thousands of screaming fans. The wildest rockers do appreciate spiritual experiences and perhaps long for a peace of their own. Conservative-looking bishops may just know the history of rock-and-roll and senior sister missionaries can get starry-eyed at the idea of being a groupie.

Whiteley concludes his film with a touching musical tribute to Kane by the Dolls’ lead singer, David Johansen, a personal, soulful, not-to-be-missed rendition of “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief.” A treat for LDS audiences, the number neatly ties up for all audiences the rock-and-roll/religion dialectic that produced the unique story that is Arthur Kane, “killer” bassist, family history worker, and at last, friend.

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At the October 1947 general conference, after Latter-day Saints had spent the summer commemorating the centennial of the pioneers’ arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, President J. Reuben Clark delivered possibly the finest, and most literary, discourse of his ecclesiastical career. “They of the Last Wagon” extols the work of the dusty, weary, rank-and-file Saints, “unknown, unremembered, unhonored in the pages of history, but lovingly revered round the hearthstones of their children and their children’s children,” those who “worked and worked, and prayed and followed, and wrought so gloriously” without ever receiving public adulation for their lifelong efforts.¹

The Fit for the Kingdom documentary movement (begun around 2000) is designed, among other things, to bring out of anonymity some of the usually anonymous Saints who make up the heart and soul of the LDS Church today. Using consumer-level video equipment, the men and women who make up this informal coalition of documentarians strive to shoot portraits of average yet remarkable Latter-day Saints in their personal environments. The result is visual records of what Neal A. Maxwell might have described as people working out their salvation within their own individualized mortal laboratories. The roughly two dozen films—twelve of which, as of this writing, are available online at http://fitforthekingdom.byu.edu—are generally known by their protagonists’ first names: Emilia the curious toddler, Ramona the hassled mother, Rusty the unlikely poet, Leroy the octogenarian crossing guard, Earl the mischievous Primary child, and so on.

Into this mix of five- to fifteen-minute films comes Angie, a fifty-three-minute longitudinal record of the last years in the life of Angie Russell, a young mother of three teenagers who is dying of breast cancer. Such a potentially emotional issue is deep water for the Fit films to swim in—they usually tend to find their richest material in quotidian moments.

Angie. Produced by the Tom Russell family.
Fit for the Kingdom, 2006

Reviewed by Randy Astle
like family scripture study or a girls’ camp snipe hunt—but Angie performs brilliantly, with restraint and without emotional exploitation. This is certainly partly due to the fact that it was Angie’s family that shot the footage (her husband Tom is a film director and professor at BYU). The filmmakers therefore had unrestricted access—a documentarian’s dream—that allows for glimpses into their family’s life that would be extremely difficult for an outsider to capture. It also means, however, that much of what goes on before the camera is sarcasm and tomfoolery; during the poignant, heartrending moments, the camera was appropriately off as the filmmakers lived through their lives and their grief. (One prominent exception, and one of the most moving moments in the film, comes after Angie’s hysterectomy, when Tom silently carries the camera down a hospital corridor into her darkened room and reaches out with his left hand to stroke her hair.) This paucity of overly emotional material is not to the film’s detriment, however, as the online preface notes:

“This is a private and dramatic story. We were anxious to respect that privacy and let the drama emerge on its own, without any interference or rushing or exaggeration by us. So the film takes its time, like the Russells did, showing their interactions and processes that are all the more precious for their plainness and simplicity. Angie has some of the difficulty of the events it describes, and hopefully a bit of the deep feeling that they engendered.²

To assert that in order to engender deep feelings the film needs to include all the tears and pathos that accompany losing a wife and mother would be to reject, or at best misunderstand, the very premise on which the Fit for the Kingdom films are founded. Much of the foundational thinking for the films stems from the work of Paul Schrader, a screenwriter and director probably best known today for his screenplays of arguably redemptive Martin Scorsese films like Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, and The Last Temptation of Christ. Nevertheless, it is his 1972 doctoral dissertation Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer that has most influenced critical thought on religious cinema and has proven a particular

Though her trials are individualized, Angie Russell’s experience serves as a type of what all Latter-day Saints—and indeed all human beings—must pass through. Courtesy Tom Russell.
focus among serious LDS cinematic critics. In the book’s conclusion, Schrader describes a polarity between abundance and sparsity that has characterized much of the world’s religious film. The abundant techniques or means, he claims, have generally been the favorite of Hollywood, typifying the “sex-and-sand” biblical epics of Cecil B. DeMille and others. Special effects allow the religious propagandist to “simply put the spiritual on film. The film is ‘real,’ the spiritual is ‘on’ film, ergo: the spiritual is real. Thus we have an entire history of cinematic magic: the blind are made to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, all on camera.”

Sparsity, on the other hand, requires more work but yields greater dividends. Schrader quotes Jacques Maritain’s 1930 work Religion and Culture, which originally proposed the abundant-sparse dichotomy, to explain sparsity as a spiritual means or technique: “The less burdened they [the sparse techniques] are by matter, the more destitute, the less visible—the more efficacious they are. This is because they are pure means for the virtue of the spirit.” Therefore, the filmmaker intent on thus expressing the transcendent must

gradually eliminate the abundant means and the earthly rationale behind them. The moment of confrontation can only occur if, at the decisive action [or “spiritual climax” of the film], the abundant means have lost their power. If the “miracle” can be seen in any humanistic tradition, psychological or sociological, the viewer will avoid a confrontation with the Transcendent. By rejecting its own potential over a period of time, cinema can create a style of confrontation. It can set the abundant and sparse means face to face in such a way that the latter seem preferable.

The miracles-on-screen tendency has had a long and distinguished career within the LDS filmic canon, and the Fit for the Kingdom movement was consciously conceived as a concrete dialectic means to challenge such films’ hegemony. The irony of these sparser movies—and, indeed, of much of life itself—is that the life-changing spiritual manifestations, the ones that are so abundantly rich and powerful, often come to us through the sparsest of means. It is not the whirlwind, earthquake, or fire that carries God’s message to us, but his still small voice. We need not always make our movies about the prophets, the architects, and the martyrs, although they have their place. We may also include the occupants of the last waggons: the Michele Meservys (The Plan, 1981), the Arthur Kanes (New York Doll, 2005), the Lethe Tatges (Joseph Smith: The Man, 1980), the Elaine Darts (Elaine Dart: Not Like Other People, 1977), the cripples, the teachers, the housewives, and the Marthas. There is a reason, I believe, that Luke recorded the story of Christ visiting Mary and Martha immediately after
the parable of the good Samaritan: there’s more to Martha’s side of the story than we generally give her credit for. There is, after all, some equation to be made between the anonymous Christian who goes about binding up wounds and the one who devotes herself to preparing a meal for her Lord.

And there is an equivalency for Angie as well. If her activity of discipleship is less obvious than in some of the other Fit for the Kingdom films, then we must realize that her duty is being performed precisely in her ostensibly formal sit-down interviews that the other films tend to eschew: these, it turns out, are her action shots. She is a wife and a mother, and she mothers her children through the medium of the camera they point at her. The Russells use the camera to discuss, evaluate, and finally reenter their familial lives enriched for the experience. This process is obvious, for instance, in the family council when they decide to shave her head for family home evening, but its most poignant example comes later, on Mother’s Day of 2004.

The sequence begins with a child filming Tom as he prepares an omelet for Angie’s surprise breakfast in bed. There is hushed banter over the quality of the cooking, in which all take part, and we see that even in her absence Angie is a unifying force for her family. The children, though ever sarcastic, radiate as they bring the food into her bedroom, and the viewer receives a privileged look into a poignant moment when a family is, for a change, serving their mom. This is a potentially spiritual scene despite—or perhaps because of—the dialogue about mundane, or sparse, subjects such as missing napkins and movies.

Cut to later that day as Mom, dressed for church (another weekly duty), sits on the porch to be interviewed by her twelve-year-old son, Isaac. In this incredible dialogue, Angie takes the opportunity to subtly
interview him about his life and emotions, although he is the one behind the camera. Like a true mother, she takes every chance to shepherd her child through mortality, including the very difficult experience of his mother’s illness. She has not thought of herself, but only of how it may be affecting him. At the scene’s end she arises, Martha-like (even on Mother’s Day, and, as they joked in an earlier scene, “even with cancer”), to go prepare dinner. As she walks past Isaac, he stops her to request one last smile for the camera. She obliges, hamming (in a moment reminiscent of the pioneering cinema verité film Lonely Boy), then asks, “Is this good?” There follows a pause that becomes poignant in its innocence; though she meant nothing profound by her unanswered question, as the strains of “If You Could Hie to Kolob” filter from the house, one must contemplate the family and their future beyond their present suffering, and the response has to be, “Yes, this is good.”

Through a great many moments like these, Angie is more than capable to stand on its own. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is that it does not have to and is not meant to; it is not an individual film released into the whirlpool of the commercial marketplace, left to rise or sink based upon the efficacy of its marketing and, only secondarily, internal merits. It is, rather, one of a collective of films—grouped together, unadorned and unadvertised, and available free of charge to anyone in the world with an Internet connection. The Fit for the Kingdom movement, in other words, represents not just a single film or even a type or style of film, but a mosaic of films. Each individual piece interlocks with, then complements and balances the others. They are short enough and sparse enough that no individual title can give a complete perspective of its subject’s life, but together the films can and do allow just such a comprehensive glimpse inside modern Mormonism in its totality, something which will be increasingly true as the films grow in number and geographical purview.

Angie, therefore, calls attention to the beauty of the entire body of the Saints, of Emanuel and Lloya and Heather and the others—of each one of us. As President Clark said:
There is no aristocracy of birth in this Church; it belongs equally to the highest and the lowliest; for as Peter said to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, seeking him: “. . . Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. (Acts 10:34, 35).”

Therefore, President Clark’s tribute is as true of Angie as of all the nineteenth-century pioneers:

So for a full hundred years . . . these multitudes have made their way to Zion . . . that all might build up the kingdom of God on earth—all welded together by common hardship and suffering, never-ending work and deep privation, tragic woes and heart-eating griefs, abiding faith and exalting joy, firm testimony and living spiritual knowledge—a mighty people.

The glimmering mosaic of the individual films comes to life within a single scene of Angie when the fairly insulated world of the Russell home, at least as we have seen it, opens up to include their entire community. In a drizzling rain, we witness a mass of people gathered to participate in a “Walk 4 Angie.” No context—exposition of who they are, who organized them, how the money will be spent, or other details—is given, but the moment is all the more powerful for its reticence. What we are left to see is a silent multitude of faces, all of them with their own joys and their own trials and worthy of their own films. This is a community of faith pulling together to buoy this family’s lagging wagon out of its particular mire, proving that the Saints do indeed bear one another’s burdens, mourn with those who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comfort. The moment is summarized in a quick shot of the tarp-covered bake sale, including a neon paper sign reading, “Help Us Help Angie Our Hero.” This brief depiction of a suburban Zion is a crucial moment, not just for this film, but for all of LDS cinema, as it encapsulates the potential community-building power inherent in film.

This unifying potential is particularly true of online digital cinema. Productions, like Angie, distributed in this way can potentially reach and unite even the most geographically distant branch of the Church. Furthermore, when we realize that, for some, Salt Lake City constitutes the other side of the world, then we truly begin to see online cinema’s egalitarian potential. Not only can it connect the entire wagon train, it can eliminate the very concept of a train by creating a global cinematic web of Saints; as we see with the walk in the rain, when the wagons are circled, no one is in the rear. Contrast this unity with the higher-stakes arena of profit-driven LDS theatrical feature films, where even the best intentions must submit to the exigencies of the market. Though this system can obviously result in occasional yet spectacular gems, within LDS cinema over the past few
years it has too often yielded public mudslinging and generally worthless films that land far short of goals like fostering personal discipleship or uniting the global Saints; even when operating at its best, commercial cinema, including DVDs, can reach only a fraction of the Church’s population. Of course, many Latter-day Saints in developing nations cannot currently access the Internet to the extent possible elsewhere, but as the technology and accessibility increase, we must be prepared. Allow me to quickly clarify that I am not advocating the abandonment of commercial LDS cinema—it stands to reason that our best filmmakers will generally be the ones who make a living at it—but I am asserting that, as one component of a multifaceted cinema, films like the Fit for the Kingdom documentaries can help bring LDS cinema out of its pageant-esque DeMillian roots into aesthetic, social, and spiritual maturity.

_Angie_, and films like it, forces us to consider cinema as a stewardship, and therefore as a crucial component of our discipleship. It challenges us to consider what our cinema is and to what purpose we shall apply it, as a hammer or as a hammock. As a film, _Angie_ is remarkable. But only as a force for increased unity and love will it prove a tribute even remotely fit to memorialize Angie Russell as we have glimpsed her. Though among the least of the Saints, Angie—like Martha, the good Samaritan, and millions of others—proves to be well described by the Savior’s words: “He that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11). If we as viewers can apply that lesson to our own lives, then the film will have done its work.

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1. J. Reuben Clark, in _Conference Report for the One Hundred Eighteenth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints_ (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1947), 155.

2. Dean Duncan, “Fit for the Kingdom: About the Films: Credits,” http://fitforthekingdom.byu.edu/?page=about&piece=credits.


5. Schrader, _Transcendental Style_, 164.


The Sixth Annual LDS Film Festival, January 17–20, 2007.
SCERA Center for the Arts, Orem, Utah

Reviewed by Candy Eash

If the Sixth Annual LDS Film Festival demonstrated nothing else, it proved that Mormon film is alive and well. The number of film submissions has grown, as has attendance (4,800 this year). Although the 2007 festival prominently showcased a dozen feature films, the short films were clearly more engaging and carried the most promise for the future of Mormon cinema.

Feature films shown at the festival generally aimed less at developing a unique Mormon cinematic approach and more at perfecting traditional Hollywood-style entertainment. With a number of the films reaching budgets close to a million dollars, the pressure on the filmmakers to cover production costs is obviously intense; hence the tendency to play it safe and stay within popular genres. Latter-day Saints producing feature films are certainly improving at imitating popular film, though this does little toward establishing a uniquely Mormon cinema.

Patterned after standard Hollywood fare is Intellectual Property, by Nicholas Peterson. With a budget of $900,000, this film achieved production values that few of the other films at the festival could touch. Still, its storyline is conventional: a genius inventor is taken advantage of by everyone he has ever known and becomes bitter, untrusting, and paranoid. He is then framed for a murder that has been plotted and carried out by Russian spies in order to steal his most brilliant invention. The structure, plot, and style of the film are formulaic, suggested nothing relevant to Mormon culture or LDS belief, and in the end this film leaves the viewer dissatisfied. Its presence at the festival raised the question as to whether replicas of Hollywood films are appropriate for an LDS film festival simply because they are made by LDS filmmakers.

Other feature films emulating standard Hollywood genres included The Dance, a romantic comedy; American Grace, a very rough Mormon remake of George Lucas’s American Graffiti (1973); Tracker, an action/thriller
comparable to *Speed* (1994) with its race against time to rescue the victim; and *Outlaw Trail*, a family western adventure about a group of kids who go in search of Butch Cassidy, *Indiana Jones* style. The most intriguing feature films of the festival were ghost stories, *The Haunting of Marsten Manor* and *Familiar Spirits*. Though their creators deserve praise for attempting to explore an untried genre in Mormon filmmaking, these avenues have still been well traveled with movies such as *Sixth Sense* (1999) and *The Others* (2001). With the exception of *Familiar Spirits* and *American Grace*, none of the features draw upon LDS beliefs or make any significant overtures to Mormon culture.

Two features that do engage LDS belief and Mormon culture are *The Return* (to be released in September 2007 under the title *Return with Honor: A Missionary Homecoming*), by Michael Amundsen and Tracy Garner; and the similarly titled *Returning with Honor*, by Samuel Adams. Both films are mission stories, and given that missions are a central feature of Mormon culture, we can expect the missionary film to be a standard Mormon film genre. Neither follows a path created by Hollywood in content or style. *Returning with Honor*, in particular, captures well the feelings of its filmmaker, who returned early from his mission to the Philippines due to illness. The film gives an honest portrait of Adams’s struggle to regain his health and his dignity, during which he learns faith, disappointment, and

In the autobiographical *Returning with Honor*, director Samuel Adams uses the powerful symbol of a missionary floating to shore to express the state of limbo experienced by early-return missionaries. Adams says he made his film in order to encourage those who struggle with their faith after ending missionary service early. Courtesy Samuel Adams.
endurance. These missionary films move beyond familiar mission-field narratives and put a human face on the difficult return process many missionaries face.

Some of the short films also fell into the trap of following established genres. Fathers and Sons is reminiscent of a Saturday Night Live skit. Above Average feels like a prime-time reality show, and Food Boy could pass for a Disney Channel tweenybopper pilot. Other short films followed established Mormon filmmaking trends, mimicking such commodities as The Home Teacher or The R.M. Many films, however, stood out for their quality and originality.

Only the Pizza Man Knows, a twenty-minute documentary biopic by Scott Christopherson, starts out addressing the common challenge of creating a film but shifts focus midstream to the challenges Christopherson has faced in his personal life and his family. The director’s father had struggled with family finances and had been overwhelmed by the stress of a professional career. He now delivers pizza. This film ventures into real and honest issues facing members of the Church and doesn’t gloss over the damage and trauma that the decisions of one individual brought into the lives of his family members. The refreshing part of the piece is the healing it also portrays. This film deals with hard subjects honestly and with charity, much like the acclaimed New York Doll (2005). Christopherson turns the documentary inward, creating a format similar in style to a personal essay.

Speaking through Glass, a documentary by Lauren Moss, is another example of adapting a conventional genre to Mormon subject matter. Stained-glass maker Thomas Holdman is a man with a severe speech impediment who immerses himself in his art and achieves greatness. Holdman’s stained-glass art has been used in many LDS temples, including Palmyra and Nauvoo. Moss’s portrayal is candid as Holdman tells us, with some difficulty, about his passion for glass. Although the film itself is formulaic, a typical documentary, the subject is poetic. While Holdman struggles with verbal communication, he has the steadiest of hands and creates beautiful art that eloquently conveys his testimony. What makes this film particularly “Mormon” is not really the director’s or the subject’s religious affiliation, but the fact that it inspires in viewers a desire to achieve greatness in spite of their challenges.

A film that ventured completely off traditional paths and broached one of the most disturbing and uncomfortable topics at the festival was Brian Skiba’s Chained, an experimental film only four minutes in length. This film is a visual representation of the emotional and psychological chains that bind individuals who become involved in Internet pornography.
The film opens with a stunning view from behind a computer monitor looking at a man whose face is lit by the glare of the screen. After his wife retires for the evening, the sound of a few mouse clicks tells the viewer that the man has ventured into treacherous online territory. The scene then shifts to show the man wrapped in chains, lying on the ground in a dark desert, with rock music blaring. This scene shift intensifies the audience’s feeling of urgency about the man’s situation. By using this heavy symbolism, the director is able to avoid showing any of the images that comprise the addiction. In a moment of realization, the man is able to understand his predicament. The tone changes again as the man simply turns off his computer, dissolving the image of the chains and irritation of the hard-edged music. Similar to the indirect way in which the Crucifixion is treated by Russell Holt in the Church film _Lamb of God_ (1993), _Chained_ portrays evil more powerfully by implication than it could by direct depiction. _Chained_ also demonstrates that it is possible to portray LDS beliefs and moral standards and thus create Mormon cinema without a single overt reference to Mormons or Mormonism.
The short film that eclipsed all others was from festival founder Christian Vuissa. *The Letter Writer* begins with an older gentleman sitting at a rolltop desk and writing a letter to someone who is, at first, believed to be his daughter. A voice-over of the words he is writing expresses the effect this woman’s kindness has had in his life. He tells of her spiritual nature and her influence for good on the people with whom she has interacted. Upon completing the letter, the old man seals the envelope and places it in the mailbox. The sun sets and rises on the envelope. Slowly the scene pans back to show the old man once again entering his den, removing his robe, and rolling back the top of his desk. Sound plays an important role in the film as we hear him strike a match and light a candle on the edge of his desk. We hear the crisp sound of a sturdy sheet of paper being pulled from a stack of elegant stationary. We see him fill his fountain pen with ink. Finally, the man selects an envelope and retrieves a well-used phonebook from a desk drawer. As he flips through the phonebook, the audience sees dozens of names that have been crossed out, indicating hundreds of past recipients of such tender letters. *The Letter Writer* gives an honest and beautiful example of how to love others by showing the thoughtful actions of one individual. This film, of course, is nondenominational and could even be considered nonreligious, kindness not being the exclusive property of any creed or sect. But Vuissa’s film is nevertheless a fine example of Mormon cinema at its best.

Animation may have emerged as the crown jewel of the festival. These short films were more polished, perhaps because of the exacting thought and time needed to complete an animated film. Each of the three animated shorts was innovative in the form its animator chose and each encompassed a subject that touched the core of Mormonism.

The first was a four-minute color animation, *Peach Baby*, by Brent Leavitt. The story is of a baby who wants to be like his father and eat a peach. After many humorous yet unsuccessful attempts, the baby is still unable to eat the fruit, a task his father accomplishes with ease. The kind
father lets the baby try and try before offering assistance. Being imperfect and working to accomplish something within family relationships, the film suggests, can be joyful.

*Toward the Theory of the Evolution of the Turkey* by Brandon Arnold is a six-minute live-action film mixed with animated, crayon-colored cutouts. Inviting imaginations was the theme of this film, which won first place in the short film genre at this year’s festival. In the film, a young girl is instructed to draw a turkey for her class. The turkey she draws is unique, with a beak shaped like a bass clarinet. The poor girl is ostracized by both her teacher and fellow classmates but bravely and stubbornly moves forward with her creative interpretations of animals. Unexpectedly, her creative drawings come to life, which causes a stir in the community. After overcoming the taunting, the girl learns to accept her uniqueness and, with some additional imaginative creatures, she soon has a garage band of very rare musical animals. Different from *Chained* or *Only the Pizza Man Knows*, which deal bluntly with their subjects, the lightheartedness of Arnold’s film shows a more entertaining side to Mormon cinema.

Finally, Annie Poon’s film, *Book of Visions*, combines the stories of Joan of Arc, Black Elk, and Joseph Smith Jr. in a stop-motion, paper-cut-out animated film. This film shows how Mormon cinema can address non-Mormon material and combine it with Mormon topics. A magical and mysterious book is uncovered by a dog in the backyard of an older gentleman. When the man opens the book, visions unfold before him (and his dog). The perspective offered by the film is respectful to each vision. Some could complain that placing Joseph Smith’s vision alongside the other two is sacrilegious. However, Poon is able to connect with a non-LDS audience by paying respect to other visions. Then, after establishing that others believe in great visions, and that these visions are revered by us as well, Poon presents the fact that Mormons also believe in revealed truths. Accepting the idea that visions are not exclusive to the LDS faith and that those other visions deserve honor is a unique and refreshing innovation.

With the excellence of these short animated productions, it would not be surprising in the near future for an animated feature film to be a breakout film in Mormon cinema. Regardless, this year’s LDS Film Festival shows that Mormon film is not a passing fad. Indeed, LDS filmmakers are beginning to establish a film tradition that Latter-day Saints would be well pleased to call their own.

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