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J. MICHAEL HUNTER

MORMONS AND POPULAR CULTURE

The **Global Influence** of an
American Phenomenon



VOLUME ONE

Cinema, Television, Theater,
Music, and Fashion

Mormons and Popular Culture

*The Global Influence of an
American Phenomenon*

Volume 1
*Cinema, Television, Theater,
Music, and Fashion*

J. Michael Hunter, Editor



PRAEGER

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This two-volume work comprises a collection of essays related to *Mormons* and *popular culture*, terms with multiple, competing definitions. For the sake of this publication, Mormons are defined as individuals who, at some point in their lives, have been baptized and confirmed members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Popular culture herein relates to American entertainment or diversions with an emphasis on mass media entertainment and ideas within the mainstream of American culture.

Within this context, *Mormons* and *mainstream* may initially appear to be contradictory terms, as Mormons are widely perceived to be unconventional. Yet, talented and innovative Mormons have influenced mainstream perceptions in America and beyond with significant contributions to such technologies as stereophonic sound, television, video games, and computer-generated imagery. Mormon artists, filmmakers, directors, musicians, actors, fashion designers, journalists, and writers have influenced national and international perceptions through mass media. Mormons, like *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer and radio host Glenn Beck, have introduced unique ideas into American mainstream culture, some of which have made a global impact. This work explores both the influence of individual Mormons on popular culture and the influence Mormonism has had on these individuals and their contributions. Mormons have, at times, presented uniquely Mormon cultural elements and perspectives to the public through the media of popular culture, and this thread of inquiry is followed in numerous essays in this publication. Likewise, American popular culture has influenced perceptions within the Mormon subculture. Mormons have emulated styles and techniques from the American mainstream in creating cultural works within the Mormon subculture—works by Mormons for Mormons.

Also, the interesting nature of Mormon “outside-ness” has brought it inside the homes of mainstream America as Mormons provide interesting subject matter for the media of popular culture—cartoons, illustrations, novels, theater, motion pictures, radio, television, music, and the internet. Since the 19th century, the portrayal of Mormons in American popular culture has ranged from pejorative to laudatory with everything in between. Mormons have been portrayed in competing and contradicting ways, and the shifting whims of a fickle entertainment culture have often influenced the Mormon image in the popular mind. This work explores that image and how it has changed over time.

This publication consists of 26 chapters with numerous sidebars and includes profiles of Mormon actors, writers, and athletes. Contributors to this set include scholars from universities across the country, as well as filmmakers, artists, journalists, and novelists. With limited space and a limitless field, the topics covered are necessarily selective, and selection depended on finding expert contributors with time to contribute. In some cases, interesting topics were unavoidably left for another time and another publication. Nonetheless, this publication provides students, scholars, and interested readers with an introduction and wide-ranging overview of Mormons and popular culture.

Support and assistance from many persons resulted in the production of this publication. A special thanks is extended to Daniel Harmon, a former editor at Praeger, who initiated the project and approached me about editing the publication. I also wish to thank James Sherman, Editorial Manager for American History and Pop Culture at ABC-CLIO, who managed the project. Appreciation is gratefully extended to Randy Astle and Gideon Burton, who provided suggestions for topics and contributors, and to Ardis Parshall, who offered much wise advice. I also wish to thank numerous individuals who assisted in the editorial process, including Amy Hoffman, Briana Beers, Caitlin Metzger, Caroline Elvey, and Christie Kapenda. Assisting me with photographs was Russ Taylor from the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, and Bill Slaughter from the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. Pauline Musig also helped locate photographs. Finally, I would like to express appreciation to my family, who supported me during the countless hours I spent working on this project.

J. Michael Hunter

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

J. Michael Hunter

The Sundance Film Festival was the brainchild of Sterling Van Wagenen (1947–), a Mormon and graduate of Brigham Young University. In 1978, Van Wagenen, who worked for the Utah Arts Council, approached his friend John Earle, who worked for

the Utah Film Commission, about putting together a local festival celebrating American film. The two had worked together on a Utah film festival in 1976 as part of the U.S. Bicentennial celebrations. Van Wagenen wanted something new and fresh, so he and Earle called Arthur Knight, a noted film professor at the University of Southern California. Knight suggested they focus on regional low budget feature films, later known as independent films. While preparing for the festival, Van Wagenen received a phone call from actor Robert Redford. The two had met on occasion at family gatherings. Redford had married a Mormon named Lola Van Wagenen, Sterling's cousin. Redford explained his interest in and love of independent films, and Van Wagenen and Redford got together to discuss the festival. Redford agreed to be on the festival's board. Under Van Wagenen and Earle's direction, Utah sponsored the first U.S. Film Festival, held in Salt Lake City in 1978. It was the first competition of independent feature films to award cash prizes. Redford attended several films at the festival and participated on one of the panel discussions. The festival got exceptional coverage in *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter*, but went \$20,000 over budget. Hoping that Redford might cover the cost, Van Wagenen met with him to show him the press clippings and explain the debt. Redford didn't offer to cover the debt; instead, Redford ended up recruiting Van Wagenen to help start a center at Redford's Sundance resort near Provo, Utah to help independent filmmakers develop their craft. The institute's founding staff met in the spring of 1980, and in 1981, the institute, with Van Wagenen as executive director, began its work of developing emerging and aspiring filmmakers, directors, producers, film composers, screenwriters, playwrights, and theater artists from around the world. In 1985 the institute rescued the financially struggling U.S. Film Festival started by Van Wagenen and Earle, and renamed it the Sundance Film Festival in 1991. The institute and the festival took up residence in Park City, Utah. Van Wagenen apparently learned a thing or two from the institute and the festival. In 1985, he produced the Academy-award-winning film *The Trip to Bountiful*, which was also nominated for a Golden Globe Award.

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COMPUTER GENERATED IMAGERY

J. Michael Hunter

Computer animation pioneer Ed Catmull (1945–) grew up in Salt Lake City, the oldest of five children in a Mormon family. As a child, he admired Walt Disney and dreamed of becoming a Disney animator. However, while in high school, he concluded he couldn't draw but seized the idea that something he was good at—computers—would someday allow him to do animation. After interrupting his college years to serve a two-year mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Catmull earned his Ph.D. from the University of Utah's groundbreaking computer graphics department, a department whose graduates incubated ideas that led to flat-screen televisions, Game Boys, and multiplex screens, as well as many other innovations. Some of his classmates went on to found Adobe Systems, Inc., Silicon Graphics, Inc., and Netscape Communications Corporation.

Catmull nurtured his dream of computer animation as the head of the Computer Graphics Lab at the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT). While there, he made annual visits to the Disney Studio, trying to get them interested in computer graphics and to convince them that his group could bring innovation to the Disney Studio. Disney was not interested. When he moved to Lucasfilms in 1979, Catmull brought with him several of his colleagues from NYIT. Together, they continued to hope for the day when a feature film would be produced using computer-generated imagery (CGI).

At Lucasfilms, Catmull developed digital image compositing technology, which was used to combine multiple images in a convincing way. Encountering financial problems, Lucas put his computer graphics group up for sale. Recently terminated Apple co-founder Steve Jobs snapped the group up for \$5 million and founded Pixar in 1986. Catmull became the Chief Technical Officer at Pixar and the key developer of RenderMan, a rendering system used to turn three dimensional scenes into digital photorealistic images. In 1993, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences presented Catmull with his first Academy of Scientific and Technical Award for developing the PhotoRealistic RenderMan software.

After spending some years creating animated shorts and commercials, Pixar created the first feature film to be made entirely with CGI—*Toy Story* (1995). Directed by John Lasseter, who had worked on CGI with Catmull at Lucasfilms, and featuring the voices of Tom Hanks and Tim Allen, the film was distributed by Walt Disney Pictures and was a megahit the world over. In 1996 Catmull received an Academy of Scientific and Technical Award “for pioneering inventions in Digital Image Compositing.”

Pixar and Disney continued to team up with one successful film after another—*A Bug's Life* (1998), *Toy Story 2* (1999), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), *Finding Nemo* (2003), and *The Incredibles* (2004). In 2001, Catmull received an Oscar “for significant advancement to the field of motion picture rendering as exemplified in Pixar's RenderMan.” In 2006, Disney paid \$7.4 billion to acquire Pixar. Lasseter was made Chief Creative Officer for Disney and Pixar animation. Catmull was named president of the Walt Disney Animation Studio and Pixar Animation Studio. The combined studios went on to produce *Cars* (2006), *Ratatouille* (2007), *Wall-E* (2008), *Up* (2009), *Toy Story 3* (2010), and *Cars 2* (2011). In 2009, Catmull was awarded the Gordon E. Sawyer Award, an honor given to “an individual in the motion picture industry whose technological contributions have brought credit to the industry.”

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VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

J. Michael Hunter

Growing up as a Mormon in Ogden, Utah, Nolan Bushnell (1943–) worked at the nearby Lagoon Amusement Park while in high school and college. He was intrigued by the arcade games, where park visitors used skill and luck to achieve some goal or win a prize. He majored in electrical engineering at the University of Utah, where he played the *Spacewar* game on DEC mainframe computers. *Spacewar* had been created by academics in the field of computer science. While at the university, Bushnell was exposed to the university's heavy involvement in computer graphics research. In 1971, Bushnell and partner Ted Dabney formed Syzygy with the intention of producing a *Spacewar* clone known as *Computer Space*. It was not only the first commercially sold coin-operated video game; it was the first commercially sold video game of any kind. The technology behind *Computer Space*, which they patented, served as the core technology for all arcade video games until 1975 when microprocessors became the technology of choice. In 1972, Bushnell and Dabney incorporated under the name "Atari," a reference to a check-like position in the game *Go*, Bushnell's favorite game. They hired their first employee, engineer Allan Alcorn, who was given the assignment of making a coin-op version of the world's first home video game console, *Magnavox Odyssey*. Alcorn added scoring and sound improvements, creating *Pong*, a very popular arcade game of the time. In 1975, Atari released a home version of *Pong* and sales soared. Bushnell purchased Pizza Time Theatre from Warner Communications with the intention of making it a place where kids could go eat pizza and play video games. He hoped it would function as a distribution channel for Atari games. What became known as Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza-Time Theatres featured animatronic animals that played music. Bushnell had always wanted to work for Walt Disney, and this was his homage to the technology developed at Disney. Bushnell is considered one of the founding fathers of the video game industry, and was named one of *Newsweek's* "50 Men Who Changed America." He has since been inducted into the Video Game Hall of Fame and the Consumer Electronics Association Hall of Fame.

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BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

J. Michael Hunter

Created by Mormon television producer and writer Glen A. Larson (1937–), the science fiction franchise *Battlestar Galactica* began with the TV series, which ran from 1978 to 1979 and continued with a brief sequel TV series in 1980 followed by book adaptations, original novels, comic books, a board game, and video games. A miniseries under the name appeared in 2003 and another TV series from 2004 to 2009. The original TV series of the 1970s contained elements of Mormon theology, and some students of the show state that the entire framework of the series was based on Mormon beliefs.

In the *Galactica* world, Earth is the fabled home of the human race, a race that left Earth to colonize numerous distant planets. Earth was originally peopled “in the beginning” under the direction of a group of superior beings, the Lords of the Kobol, who taught the humans the principles of light. In Mormon theology, Kolob is the star nearest “unto the throne of God.” The human colonies are run by a president and a Council of Twelve (sometimes called a “Quorum of Twelve”). The LDS Church is governed by a president and The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (sometimes called the “Council of the Twelve”).

The episodes entitled “The War of the Gods” fit nicely with the Mormon “plan of salvation,” which began with the “war in heaven.” In the series, the “angels” from the ships of light declare that agency is supreme, explaining that no one can interfere with freedom of choice unless an individual turns over control of themselves to another. Count Iblis, the Satan figure in the TV series, is at war with the beings in the Ship of Light, and he can only control those who have “freely given him dominion.” Freedom of choice—agency—is at the core of the Mormon “plan of salvation,” and Satan can only control those who give him control. The beings from the Ships of Light—called Gods in the episodes’ titles—tell the humans, “As you are now, we once were; as we are now, you may become.” Joseph Smith, the first president of the LDS Church, stated, “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!” Previous to becoming the fifth president of the LDS Church, Lorenzo Snow wrote the following couplet: “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.”

In the TV series, the once numerous and powerful human race has, for the most part, been destroyed. Adama, Captain of the *Galactica*, leads a few human survivors

from the colonies in a search for Earth as they are pursued by a race of malevolent robots bent on their destruction. Adama is portrayed as having priestly as well as secular authority, and in one episode he officiates at the wedding of his son, during which the couple is “sealed” together “for time and all eternity.” In the marriages that take place in Mormon temples, couples are “sealed” “for time and all eternity.”

Larson is credited with coining the word “battlestar,” which is a contraction of the phrase “line-of-battle starship” and for creating the faux curse word “frak.” The light scanning effect used for the car in the TV series *Knight Rider* and for Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica* is called a “Larson Scanner.” Larson was involved in the development of numerous TV series, including *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974–1978) and *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979–1981). Larson received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his contributions to the television industry.

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PAGEANTS

J. Michael Hunter

Mormons have been sponsoring and staging outdoor theatrical productions known as pageants since as early as the 1930s. Mormon pageants often feature costumed casts of hundreds of performers and may include high-tech special effects, orchestras, choirs, and dancers. Traditionally, most pageants have been initiated and sponsored by local LDS Church leaders and produced using the skills and talents of local Mormons.

Most Mormon pageants are presented outdoors on temporary stages on the site of a special event or place in LDS Church history or near the grounds of LDS temples. Each pageant typically runs annually for seven nightly performances to as many as 20,000 people at a single performance, although there are pageants as one-time events to celebrate special anniversaries.

Mormon pageants usually celebrate a place, person, or event in religious history. For example, the Hill Cumorah Pageant, first produced in 1937, is held annually near Palmyra, New York, to tell the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon through Joseph Smith, who lived in that region. The Nauvoo Pageant, performed since 1976, focuses on the establishment of Nauvoo, Illinois, by 19th-century Mormons and their efforts to build the Nauvoo Temple.

Some pageants focus on local or regional Mormon settlements. The Castle Valley Pageant, begun in 1978 and held against a spectacular natural backdrop five miles from Castle Dale, Utah, describes the settlement of Emery County, Utah, by Mormon pioneers. The Manti Pageant, performed in the small Utah community of Manti since 1967, tells of LDS Church origins and teachings, the westward movement, and the settlement of Sanpete County, Utah, by Mormon pioneers. The Oakland Pageant, begun in 1964 and performed indoors in a LDS Church building in Oakland, California, tells the story of LDS Church origins and the movement of Mormons to California. The Clarkston Pageant focuses on Martin Harris, an early Mormon who assisted with the publication of the Book of Mormon. Harris lived his final years in Clarkston, Utah.

Other pageant sites have no significant connections to the content of the performances. For example, Calgary Pageant, begun in 1963 in Calgary, Alberta, is presented annually during the week before Christmas and focuses on the birth of Christ. The Mesa Pageant, begun in 1938 in Mesa, Arizona, presents the life of Christ and has grown to become one of the world's largest Easter pageants.

Mormon pageants have become increasingly sophisticated with the use of powerful audio and lighting systems, original prerecorded music, multilevel stages, thousands of costumes, stuntmen, and special effects that include water cannons, earthquakes, floods, airborne performers, fireballs, and other fiery imagery. Pageants like those in Mesa and at the Hill Cumorah have garnered regional and national recognition with coverage in publications like the *New York Times* and news shows like ABC's *Nightline*.

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STEREOPHONIC SOUND

J. Michael Hunter

Harvey Fletcher (1884–1981), a Mormon and graduate of Brigham Young University, was an American physicist known as the “father of stereophonic sound.” As Director of Research at Bell Laboratories, Fletcher oversaw three decades of acoustical research, leading to developments in the use of high fidelity recordings, stereophonic sound, and talking motion pictures. When Fletcher and his “sound sculptors” demonstrated the “new reality” known as “stereo-phonics” sound in New York City in January 1934, the *New York Times* stated: “A new world, populated with substances and entities fashioned of ‘sculpted music,’ made ‘solid’ by giving it three dimensions, through which distant unseen things become ‘substantiated’ and assume the aspects of reality that can almost be seen, touched and felt was demonstrated for the first time

in New York." The newspaper went on to report that the "mystified and often terrified audience heard—and many of them 'felt' and 'saw'—phenomena and effects that, had it not been for the knowledge they were witnessing a practical scientific demonstration, might have made them believe they were attending a spiritualistic séance. Some women in the audience, admitting a feeling of 'spookiness,' left the auditorium in fright." Fletcher held more than 40 patents for acoustical devices and published more than 60 major scientific works. He also oversaw research leading to the development of color TV. He won numerous awards for his contributions, including the Presidential Citation from Harry S. Truman, and the Progress Medal Award by the American Academy of Motion Pictures.

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About the Editor

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J. Michael Hunter is Mormon Studies Librarian and Chair of the Religion/Family History Department at the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. He has BA, MLIS, and MPA degrees from Brigham Young University and an MA degree from California State University, Dominguez Hills. He is a former librarian at the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. He has published two novels, numerous articles in the field of Mormon Studies, and a book about Mormon folklore and urban legends.

MORMONS AND POPULAR CULTURE

The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon

Marilyn Monroe, Mickey Mouse, and the Sundance Film Festival. The invention of television and stereophonic sound, and the development of computer-generated imagery. Stephenie Meyer's popular *Twilight* series, and bestselling science fiction and fantasy books. These are just a few of the topics in popular culture with strong connections to Mormon individuals.

Mormons and Popular Culture: The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon provides an unprecedented, comprehensive treatment of Mormons and popular culture. Authored by a Mormon studies librarian and author of numerous writings regarding Mormon folklore, culture, and history, this two-volume work provides students, scholars, and interested readers with an introduction and wide-ranging overview of the topic that can serve as a key reference on the topic.

The work contains fascinating coverage on the most influential Mormon actors, musicians, fashion designers, writers, artists, media personalities, and athletes. Some topics—such as the Mormon influence at Disney, and how Mormon inventors have assisted in transforming American popular culture through the inventions of television, stereophonic sound, video games, and computer-generated animation—represent largely unknown information. The broad overview of Mormons and American popular culture offered can be used as a launching pad for further investigation; researchers will find the references within the books' well-documented chapters helpful.

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