



---

4-1-2007

## Establishing Shot: The Scope of Mormon Cinema

Gideon O. Burton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Burton, Gideon O. (2007) "Establishing Shot: The Scope of Mormon Cinema," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 46 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol46/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



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.<sup>1</sup> “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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.

---

Gideon O. Burton (gideon\_burton@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of English at Brigham Young University, where he teaches Renaissance literature, Mormon literature, and literature and film. He serves as chair of the BYU Studies Arts and Sciences Board. He received his PhD in rhetoric, linguistics, and literature from the University of Southern California in 1994. A past president of the Association for Mormon Letters, he has been active in Mormon literary studies and has organized the LDS Film Forum associated with the annual LDS Film Festival. With BYU librarians he created and maintains the Mormon Literature & Creative Arts database (<http://mormonlit.lib.byu.edu>).

1. “Messages from the Missions,” *Improvement Era* 21 (March 1918): 453.
2. “Making Mormon Cinema: Hype and Hope,” *LDS Film Forum* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Department of Theatre and Media Arts, 2002), 7–16. Online at <http://burton.byu.edu/articles/MakingMormonCinema.pdf>.
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.”
4. See Dean Duncan, “Film,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media*, ed. Dan Stout (New York: Routledge, 2006), 144–52; and Anton Karl Kozlovic, “Hollywood Hermeneutics: A Religion-and-Film Genre for the Twenty-First Century,” *The Film Journal*, online at <http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue11/religion.html>. For general discussion, see *The Journal of Religion and Film* and *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*.
5. Wayne C. Booth, “Question/Answer Session,” in *Letters to Smoother, etc. . . . : Proceedings of the 1980 BYU Symposium on the Humanities*, ed. Joy C. Ross and Steven C. Walker (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, [1981]), 32.