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Astle and Burton: A History of Mormon Cinema



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



An empty soundstage at the LDS Motion Picture Studio. In its half century of existence, the MPS has produced over one thousand films. Courtesy Brigham Young University.

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!”⁸ A month later the *Cleveland Ohio News* confirmed that “the first Mormon picture is finished.”⁹ 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

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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,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 Fourth Wave (1974–2000): The Mass Media Era

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.

The Fifth Wave (2000–present): Cultural and Commercial Viability

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.