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"There Is Room for Both": Mormon Cinema and the Paradoxes of Mormon Culture

Terryl L. Givens

"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.

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Mormon Cinema and the Paradoxes of Mormon Culture[1]

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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."[2] 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 canvasses 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."[3]

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."[7]

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);[8] 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."[9] 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
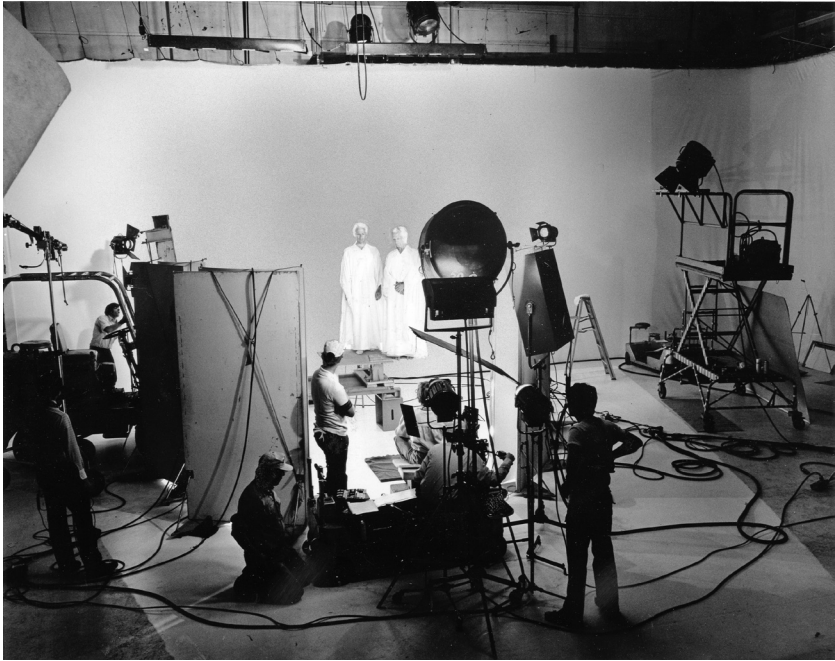
The willingness in Mormonism to collapse the sacred distance between the common and the divine is evident in the depiction of holy beings. In a rare behind-the-scenes shot, two actors dressed as members of the Godhead prepare to be filmed. Latter-day Saints have often been criticized by surrounding cultures not ready to disregard boundaries that keep heaven and earth apart. LDS Church Archives © Intellectual Reserve Inc.

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 a believer, 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,

Director Richard Dutcher juxtaposes several situational and theological para-
doxes in his film *States of Grace* (2005). Dutcher's film attempts to depict, more
candidly than any other LDS film to date, the painful contradictions and para-
doxes inherent in life and how God's redemption overrules them. © Main Street
Movie Co.

questioning the seriousness with which Latter-day Saints view a sin "sec-
ond 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 inex-
pressibly sublime. But second, guilt so extreme as to be virtually irredeem-
able 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 naïvely 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 unconsoled 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."[13] 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

Until Dutcher's *Brigham City* (2001), LDS ordinances such as the sacrament were rarely depicted on camera, let alone made an integral part of the story structure in a fictitious film. Though some were not comfortable with Dutcher's interweaving of holy emblems and drama, the final scene's emotional power is arguably unmatched in all of LDS cinema. © Main Street Movie Co.

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

Arthur Kane as a New York Doll in the 1970s. Internal disputes and the drug-induced death of a band member led to the Dolls' breakup. In the late 1980s, two more former band members met drug-related deaths, and it seemed Kane was on the same path. Then he met the LDS missionaries. Courtesy Greg Whiteley.

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.

Terryl L. Givens (tgivens@richmond.edu) is Professor of Literature and Religion and is the James A. Bostwick Chair of English at the University of Richmond. Dr. Givens's publications include *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* and *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (both published by Oxford University Press).

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.

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3. Frederick Barnard, "Culture and Civilization in Modern Times," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* ed. Philip P. Wiener, 5 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1973), 1:618.

4. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust,* trans. Walter Arndt (New York: Norton, 2001), 46.

5. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:306–7.

6. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 5:332, October 7, 1857.

7. James Gordon Bennett, *New York Herald,* August 4, 1842.

8. Ezra Booth to Reverend I. Eddy, published in *Ohio Star,* October 27, 1831; J. M. Peck, *A Gazeteer of Illinois* (Jacksonville, Ill.: Goudy, 1834), 53–54; Charles Dickens, "In the Name of the Prophet—Smith!" *Household Words* 3 (July 19, 1851): 385.

9. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 13:335, April 24, 1870.

10. Richard Alan Nelson, "From Antagonism to Acceptance: Mormons and the Silver Screen," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10 (Spring 1977): 63.

11. James V. D'Arc, "Darryl F. Zanuck's 'Brigham Young': A Film in Context," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 1 (1989): 6.

12. Truman G. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 19, no. 4 (1979): 436.

13. I find Gideon Burton's application of that term to Dutcher's films especially apt. See Thomas J. Lefler and Gideon O. Burton, "Toward A Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic: Film Styles in *Legacy,*" in this issue, *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007): 274–304.