BYU Studies Quarterly

Volume 46 | Issue 2 Article 13

4-1-2007

A Manifesto for "Fit for the Kingdom": Dean Duncan's Proposal for a Mormon Documentary Series

Gideon O. Burton

A Manifesto for "Fit for the Kingdom"

Dean Duncan's Proposal for a Mormon Documentary Series

Gideon O. Burton

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

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

Duncan's funding proposal, because it can be seen as a type of manifesto, is appropriately written in a tone of religious and artistic idealism, which in itself speaks to the seriousness with which some Latter-day Saints are attempting to reorient contemporary Mormon filmmaking. The tradition of writing film manifestos started in the earliest years of cinema and continues to the present. Filmmakers typically describe their political,

artistic, or philosophical agenda using visionary terms; very often, these strong ideological positions have resulted in strong aesthetic traditions that have influenced the course of global cinema. The ideologically charged writings of John Grierson,[1] Sergei Eisenstein,[2] and the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics[3] of the 1950s thus charted the course of documentary film, revolutionary Soviet cinema, and the French New Wave, respectively. More formal manifestos include Dziga Vertov's 1929 work describing how film's capabilities could provide the impetus for communism,[4] the 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto, in which twenty-six young German filmmakers proclaimed the principles that led to the New German Cinema,[5] and the Dogme 95 manifesto (1995), which insisted upon the use of low production values to counterbalance the cultural dominance of high-budget films.[6] Other examples are legion.

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

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

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

1. John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 145–56.

2. Sergei M. Eisenstein, *The Film Sense,* trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

3. For example, François Truffaut, "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français," *Cahiers du Cinéma* (January 1954): 15–29.

4. Graham Roberts, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 5–41.

5. Alexander Kluge and others, "The Oberhausen Manifesto," in *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices,* ed. Eric Rentschler (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 2.

6. http://www.dogme95.dk/menu/menuset.htm.

Dean Duncan's Project Proposal

To the Members of the Media Projects Committee,

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

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

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

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

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

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

C. Though our concentration on everyday lives will sometimes seem only to prove that man is born to trouble, and though our best attempts to succor or share will often founder or even fail, documentary demonstrates that tribulation is a blessed lot, because it is only in passing through it that we find transcendence.

Modern broadcast culture is inclined to celebrate counterfeit substance and compromised virtue. For our part, we wish to resist exaggeration in what we say and avoid compulsory means in the way we say it. We wish to look for quiet, exemplary Latter-day Saint lives and to document them in the most direct and unadorned fashion that we can.

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

> Let all things be done decently and in order. (1 Cor. 14:40)
>
> For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. (1 Cor. 1:26–27)
>
> But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. . . . And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary. . . . And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. (1 Cor. 12:18, 21–22, 26)
>
> Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matt. 6:26–29)
>
> And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

In our society's media production, it has often been our impulse to sound the brass and tinkle the cymbal and spend the money, betraying in our excess a lack of confidence both in our audiences and in our message,

or perhaps even an estrangement from that message. It should not be thus; a true lily need not be gilded, though without the glitter the insensitive, or those starved for more honest representations, may miss its beauty. We can change this. Consider how George Eliot appreciates a person who has no celebrity but who has quiet, important influence upon others in her everyday life:

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

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

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

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

7. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996), 799.

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

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

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

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

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

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

> There are two kinds of travel. The usual way is to take the fastest imaginable conveyance along the shortest road. The other way is not to care

> particularly where you are going or how long it will take you, or whether you will get there or not. These two methods of travel are perhaps easiest to be seen by watching hunting hounds. One hound will follow his nose directly to his prey. Another will follow his nose in a roundabout way to molehills, empty rabbit holes, garbage cans, and trees; and perhaps not pay any attention to his prey even when he happens upon it. This second way of getting around has always been pointed out as the nicest for, as you can see in the case of the slower hunting hound, you are able to see more of what is going on in the world and also how nature is getting along.[8]

This, and more besides, is what we hope to accomplish with our documentary visits.

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

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

8. William Péne du Bois, *The Twenty-One Balloons* (New York: Viking, 1948), 3.

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

Dean Duncan (dean_duncan@byu.edu) is Associate Professor of Theatre and Media Arts at Brigham Young University.