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Angie. Produced by the Tom Russell family.

Fit for the Kingdom, 2006

Reviewed by Randy Astle

At the October 1947 general conference, after Latter-day Saints had spent the summer commemorating the centennial of the pioneers' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, President J. Reuben Clark delivered possibly the finest, and most literary, discourse of his ecclesiastical career. "They of the Last Wagon" extols the work of the dusty, weary, rank-and-file Saints, "unknown, unremembered, unhonored in the pages of history, but lovingly revered round the hearthstones of their children and their children's children," those who "worked and worked, and prayed and followed, and wrought so gloriously" without ever receiving public adulation for their lifelong efforts.¹

The Fit for the Kingdom documentary movement (begun around 2000) is designed, among other things, to bring out of anonymity some of the usually anonymous Saints who make up the heart and soul of the LDS Church today. Using consumer-level video equipment, the men and women who make up this informal coalition of documentarians strive to shoot portraits of average yet remarkable Latter-day Saints in their personal environments. The result is visual records of what Neal A. Maxwell might have described as people working out their salvation within their own individualized mortal laboratories. The roughly two dozen films—twelve of which, as of this writing, are available online at <http://fitforthe kingdom.byu.edu>—are generally known by their protagonists' first names: *Emilia* the curious toddler, *Ramona* the hassled mother, *Rusty* the unlikely poet, *Leroy* the octogenarian crossing guard, *Earl* the mischievous Primary child, and so on.

Into this mix of five- to fifteen-minute films comes *Angie*, a fifty-three-minute longitudinal record of the last years in the life of Angie Russell, a young mother of three teenagers who is dying of breast cancer. Such a potentially emotional issue is deep water for the Fit films to swim in—they usually tend to find their richest material in quotidian moments

like family scripture study or a girls' camp snipe hunt—but *Angie* performs brilliantly, with restraint and without emotional exploitation. This is certainly partly due to the fact that it was Angie's family that shot the footage (her husband Tom is a film director and professor at BYU). The filmmakers therefore had unrestricted access—a documentarian's dream—that allows for glimpses into their family's life that would be extremely difficult for an outsider to capture. It also means, however, that much of what goes on before the camera is sarcasm and tomfoolery; during the poignant, heartrending moments, the camera was appropriately off as the filmmakers lived through their lives and their grief. (One prominent exception, and one of the most moving moments in the film, comes after Angie's hysterectomy, when Tom silently carries the camera down a hospital corridor into her darkened room and reaches out with his left hand to stroke her hair.) This paucity of overly emotional material is not to the film's detriment, however, as the online preface notes:

This is a private and dramatic story. We were anxious to respect that privacy and let the drama emerge on its own, without any interference or rushing or exaggeration by us. So the film takes its time, like the Russells did, showing their interactions and processes that are all the more precious for their plainness and simplicity. *Angie* has some of the difficulty of the events it describes, and hopefully a bit of the deep feeling that they engendered.²

To assert that in order to engender deep feelings the film needs to include all the tears and pathos that accompany losing a wife and mother would be to reject, or at best misunderstand, the very premise on which the *Fit for the Kingdom* films are founded. Much of the foundational thinking for the films stems from the work of Paul Schrader, a screenwriter and director probably best known today for his screenplays of arguably redemptive Martin Scorsese films like *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Nevertheless, it is his 1972 doctoral dissertation *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* that has most influenced critical thought on religious cinema and has proven a particular



Though her trials are individualized, Angie Russell's experience serves as a type of what all Latter-day Saints—and indeed all human beings—must pass through. Courtesy Tom Russell.

focus among serious LDS cinematic critics. In the book's conclusion, Schrader describes a polarity between abundance and sparsity that has characterized much of the world's religious film. The abundant techniques or means, he claims, have generally been the favorite of Hollywood, typifying the "sex-and-sand" biblical epics of Cecil B. DeMille and others. Special effects allow the religious propagandist to "simply put the spiritual on film. The film is 'real,' the spiritual is 'on' film, ergo: the spiritual is real. Thus we have an entire history of cinematic magic: the blind are made to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, all on camera."³

Sparsity, on the other hand, requires more work but yields greater dividends. Schrader quotes Jacques Maritain's 1930 work *Religion and Culture*, which originally proposed the abundant-sparse dichotomy, to explain sparsity as a spiritual means or technique: "The less burdened they [the sparse techniques] are by matter, the more destitute, the less visible—the more efficacious they are. This is because they are pure means for the virtue of the spirit."⁴ Therefore, the filmmaker intent on thus expressing the transcendent must

gradually eliminate the abundant means and the earthly rationale behind them. The moment of confrontation can only occur if, at the decisive action [or "spiritual climax" of the film], the abundant means have lost their power. If the "miracle" can be seen in any humanistic tradition, psychological or sociological, the viewer will avoid a confrontation with the Transcendent. By rejecting its own potential over a period of time, cinema can create a style of confrontation. It can set the abundant and sparse means face to face in such a way that the latter seem preferable.⁵

The miracles-on-screen tendency has had a long and distinguished career within the LDS filmic canon, and the Fit for the Kingdom movement was consciously conceived as a concrete dialectic means to challenge such films' hegemony. The irony of these sparser movies—and, indeed, of much of life itself—is that the life-changing spiritual manifestations, the ones that are so *abundantly* rich and powerful, often come to us through the sparsest of means. It is not the whirlwind, earthquake, or fire that carries God's message to us, but his still small voice. We need not always make our movies about the prophets, the architects, and the martyrs, although they have their place. We may also include the occupants of the last wagons: the Michele Meservys (*The Plan*, 1981), the Arthur Kanes (*New York Doll*, 2005), the Lethe Tatges (*Joseph Smith: The Man*, 1980), the Elaine Darts (*Elaine Dart: Not Like Other People*, 1977), the cripples, the teachers, the housewives, and the Marthas. There is a reason, I believe, that Luke recorded the story of Christ visiting Mary and Martha immediately after

the parable of the good Samaritan: there's more to Martha's side of the story than we generally give her credit for. There is, after all, some equation to be made between the anonymous Christian who goes about binding up wounds and the one who devotes herself to preparing a meal for her Lord.

And there is an equivalency for Angie as well. If her *activity* of discipleship is less obvious than in some of the other *Fit for the Kingdom* films, then we must realize that her duty is being performed precisely in her ostensibly formal sit-down interviews that the other films tend to eschew: these, it turns out, are her action shots. She is a wife and a mother, and she *mothers* her children through the medium of the camera they point at her. The Russells use the camera to discuss, evaluate, and finally reenter their familial lives enriched for the experience. This process is obvious, for instance, in the family council when they decide to shave her head for family home evening, but its most poignant example comes later, on Mother's Day of 2004.

The sequence begins with a child filming Tom as he prepares an omelet for Angie's surprise breakfast in bed. There is hushed banter over the quality of the cooking, in which all take part, and we see that even in her absence Angie is a unifying force for her family. The children, though ever sarcastic, radiate as they bring the food into her bedroom, and the viewer receives a privileged look into a poignant moment when a family is, for a change, serving their mom. This is a potentially spiritual scene despite—or perhaps because of—the dialogue about mundane, or *sparse*, subjects such as missing napkins and movies.

Cut to later that day as Mom, dressed for church (another weekly duty), sits on the porch to be interviewed by her twelve-year-old son, Isaac. In this incredible dialogue, Angie takes the opportunity to subtly



A not uncommon scene in any Latter-day Saint home. Part of the purpose of the *Fit for the Kingdom* films is to honor quotidian moments that usually exist only in home movies and raise them to the level of art and testimony. Courtesy Tom Russell.

interview *him* about his life and emotions, although he is the one behind the camera. Like a true mother, she takes every chance to shepherd her child through mortality, including the very difficult experience of *his mother's* illness. She has not thought of herself, but only of how it may be affecting him. At the scene's end she arises, Martha-like (even on Mother's Day, and, as they joked in an earlier scene, "even with cancer"), to go prepare dinner.



Angie taking advantage of the camera to send a message to her children. Courtesy Tom Russell.

As she walks past Isaac, he stops her to request one last smile for the camera. She obliges, hamming (in a moment reminiscent of the pioneering cinema verité film *Lonely Boy*), then asks, "Is this good?" There follows a pause that becomes poignant in its innocence; though she meant nothing profound by her unanswered question, as the strains of "If You Could Hie to Kolob" filter from the house, one must contemplate the family and their future beyond their present suffering, and the response has to be, "Yes, this is good."

Through a great many moments like these, *Angie* is more than capable to stand on its own. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is that it does not have to and is not meant to; it is not an individual film released into the whirlpool of the commercial marketplace, left to rise or sink based upon the efficacy of its marketing and, only secondarily, internal merits. It is, rather, one of a collective of films—grouped together, unadorned and unadvertised, and available free of charge to anyone in the world with an Internet connection. The Fit for the Kingdom movement, in other words, represents not just a single film or even a type or style of film, but a *mosaic* of films. Each individual piece interlocks with, then complements and balances the others. They are short enough and sparse enough that no individual title can give a complete perspective of its subject's life, but together the films can and do allow just such a comprehensive glimpse inside modern Mormonism in its totality, something which will be increasingly true as the films grow in number and geographical purview.

Angie, therefore, calls attention to the beauty of the entire body of the Saints, of *Emanuel* and *Lloya* and *Heather* and the others—of each one of us. As President Clark said:

There is no aristocracy of birth in this Church; it belongs equally to the highest and the lowliest; for as Peter said to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, seeking him: “. . . Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. (Acts 10:34, 35).”⁶

Therefore, President Clark’s tribute is as true of *Angie* as of all the nineteenth-century pioneers:

So for a full hundred years . . . these multitudes have made their way to Zion . . . that all might build up the kingdom of God on earth—all welded together by common hardship and suffering, never-ending work and deep privation, tragic woes and heart-eating griefs, abiding faith and exalting joy, firm testimony and living spiritual knowledge—a mighty people.⁷

The glimmering mosaic of the individual films comes to life within a single scene of *Angie* when the fairly insulated world of the Russell home, at least as we have seen it, opens up to include their entire community. In a drizzling rain, we witness a mass of people gathered to participate in a “Walk 4 Angie.” No context—exposition of who they are, who organized them, how the money will be spent, or other details—is given, but the moment is all the more powerful for its reticence. What we are left to see is a silent multitude of faces, all of them with their own joys and their own trials and worthy of their own films. This is a community of faith pulling together to buoy this family’s lagging wagon out of its particular mire, proving that the Saints do indeed bear one another’s burdens, mourn with those who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comfort. The moment is summarized in a quick shot of the tarp-covered bake sale, including a neon paper sign reading, “Help Us Help Angie Our Hero.” This brief depiction of a suburban Zion is a crucial moment, not just for this film, but for all of LDS cinema, as it encapsulates the potential community-building power inherent in film.

This unifying potential is particularly true of online digital cinema. Productions, like *Angie*, distributed in this way can potentially reach and unite even the most geographically distant branch of the Church. Furthermore, when we realize that, for some, Salt Lake City constitutes the other side of the world, then we truly begin to see online cinema’s egalitarian potential. Not only can it connect the entire wagon train, it can eliminate the very *concept* of a train by creating a global cinematic *web* of Saints; as we see with the walk in the rain, when the wagons are circled, no one is in the rear. Contrast this unity with the higher-stakes arena of profit-driven LDS theatrical feature films, where even the best intentions must submit to the exigencies of the market. Though this system can obviously result in occasional yet spectacular gems, within LDS cinema over the past few

years it has too often yielded public mudslinging and generally worthless films that land far short of goals like fostering personal discipleship or uniting the global Saints; even when operating at its best, commercial cinema, including DVDs, can reach only a fraction of the Church's population. Of course, many Latter-day Saints in developing nations cannot currently access the Internet to the extent possible elsewhere, but as the technology and accessibility increase, we must be prepared. Allow me to quickly clarify that I am not advocating the abandonment of commercial LDS cinema—it stands to reason that our best filmmakers will generally be the ones who make a living at it—but I am asserting that, as one component of a multifaceted cinema, films like the *Fit for the Kingdom* documentaries can help bring LDS cinema out of its pageant-esque DeMillian roots into aesthetic, social, and spiritual maturity.

Angie, and films like it, forces us to consider cinema as a stewardship, and therefore as a crucial component of our discipleship. It challenges us to consider what our cinema is and to what purpose we shall apply it, as a hammer or as a hammock. As a film, *Angie* is remarkable. But only as a force for increased unity and love will it prove a tribute even remotely fit to memorialize Angie Russell as we have glimpsed her. Though among the least of the Saints, Angie—like Martha, the good Samaritan, and millions of others—proves to be well described by the Savior's words: "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:11). If we as viewers can apply that lesson to our own lives, then the film will have done its work.

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1. J. Reuben Clark, in *Conference Report for the One Hundred Eighteenth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1947), 155.

2. Dean Duncan, "Fit for the Kingdom: About the Films: Credits," <http://fitforthe kingdom.byu.edu/?page=about&piece=credits>.

3. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 163.

4. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 154.

5. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 164.

6. Clark, in *Conference Report*, 160.

7. Clark, in *Conference Report*, 159.