BYU Studies Quarterly

Volume 48 | Issue 2 Article 5

4-2009

Artistry and Aesthetics in Contemporary Mormon and Iranian Film

Travis T. Anderson

Artistry and Aesthetics in Contemporary Mormon and Iranian Film

Travis T. Anderson

Having discovered that The Movies are infiltrating his provincial world, a modern Don Quixote decides to muster arms against that assault. Much to the man's dismay, however, his friends and family neither share his reactionary fears of the silver screen nor appreciate his moral remonstrations against it. In fact, over time they begin exploiting his zealous antics for comic effect, luring him into situations where his passionate opposition to The Movies can be secretly transformed into the subject for one. Although he is initially offended by this duplicity, once the hapless crusader finally sees the film in which he has unwittingly played a starring role, all is forgiven and he becomes an enthusiastic advocate of everything cinematic.

As contemporary as this scenario might read today, it is actually the plot of a 1932 silent comedy called *Haji Aqa, the Movie Actor*—the second feature film ever made in Iran. The possibility that twenty-first-century members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints might find themselves sympathetically engaged and perhaps even amused by such a plot is no mere coincidence.

Almost from their inception, cinematic media and technologies have been accepted and appropriated with surprising enthusiasm by Iranians and Mormons alike. While both cultures appear to have embraced cinema as a natural outgrowth of their lively and longstanding appreciation for art and family-oriented entertainment in general, the eager involvement in film by LDS faithful is no doubt also due to our widespread belief that all discoveries and inventions with the potential to benefit humankind have their source in God and are therefore intended to improve education, disseminate truth, and otherwise further God's purposes on earth.[1] On the

one hand, that belief might certainly help explain the incalculable time and capital officially invested by the LDS Church in making and distributing films, television programs, and related media of its own. It might also help explain the degree to which many individual Latter-day Saints have themselves made disproportionately numerous and significant contributions to the cinematic arts, both technologically and artistically. What it does not explain, on the other hand, is why the artistic progress and quality of *Mormon cinema as such*—both in and out of the commercial arena, and notwithstanding our remarkable beginnings in the industry and the capacity of faithful Latter-day Saints for spiritually enhanced talents and faculties—has thus far, with few exceptions, fallen short of its potential.

Our artistic inconsistencies and disappointments are particularly vexing when considered alongside the more notable accomplishments of Iranian film artists, who have overcome much more formidable obstacles than those with which we have had to contend and in the process have created an astonishing number of spiritually profound, culturally insightful, and cinematically sophisticated films that have not only artistically outshined most of our own best efforts to date but have also played to far greater critical acclaim than any Mormon production has yet to receive. And perhaps more tellingly, were we Latter-day Saints to judge our own movies against these standout Iranian films—with reference either to their artistic quality or to their spiritual profundity (in other words, were we to judge them with reference to the very criteria most of us would likely cite as hallmarks of great art, including the fundamental "virtues and values" that underlie the superficial variants some of our prominent LDS filmmakers and publishers currently extol[2])—many of us would no doubt begin to wonder if the best "Mormon" feature films aren't being made today by Muslims in Iran.[3] Although the last decade (and especially the last few years) has seen notable improvements in LDS cinema as well as a small number of really praiseworthy films, our homegrown movies are frequently sentimental and formulaic, and all too often they mistake cinematic prettiness and high production values for genuine artistry. Moreover, as painful as it is to admit, the primary virtue of which many Mormon films can boast is a mere lack of the art form's most obvious moral vices—and as I have argued elsewhere, the lack of vice is but one of many important aspects of virtue.[4]

It is sometimes said that our high moral standards place LDS faithful at an artistic disadvantage, since we are more discriminating than our peers both in terms of what we will watch and what we will make. But the history of Iranian film would suggest that the curious gap in artistic accomplishment and recognition between our two cinematic cultures is not due to a difference in the ethics embraced by our respective filmmakers

and audiences. In fact, Iranian filmmakers have often accomplished their impressive work while adhering to Muslim moral codes even stricter in some ways than our own high standards. It is equally unlikely that the dearth of outside attention to distinctly Mormon movies and moviemakers could be explained away as backlash for our outspoken opposition to the liberal values manifest by most Indie (studio-independent) and Hollywood films, or that the absence of critical kudos for many Mormon movies could be attributed to a disproportionate commitment among LDS artists to spiritual or religious ideals, since many acclaimed and groundbreaking Iranian films are deeply moral and unapologetically concerned with spiritual and often overtly religious issues.

While many LDS religious beliefs are certainly unique, we are not as singular a culture as we might sometimes think we are, and our art needs to reflect that fact; our theological status as a "peculiar people" does not insulate us from the challenges, struggles, desires, and day-to-day experiences common to all other people (and all other moviemakers), so it also should not excuse us from creating art that can profoundly and empathetically speak to those shared aspects of the human condition. All too often when our films speak to no one but ourselves, it is because they are needlessly idiosyncratic and self-absorbed, not because others aren't willing to listen. The respective successes of *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001), *New York Doll* (2005), and *Saints and Soldiers* (2003) prove that when we make films that warrant either widespread attention or critical acclaim, we'll get it—just as culturally peculiar Iranian films have successfully and often unexpectedly appealed to audiences far beyond Iran's own borders.

In seeking to understand the reasons for these important differences between Iranian and Mormon cinema, it might help to ask the following questions. To what degree does each cinematic culture (at the very least, among its own filmmakers) demonstrate a thorough understanding of film artistry and aesthetics? Does each culture speak eloquently to important issues with unique, recognizable voices, as well as with an obvious fluency in the common language and conventions of film? Are there compelling styles, concerns, subjects, and genres in each culture's film oeuvre which are particularly revelatory of that culture's identity, values, and spirituality, and which are appealing to discerning audiences both inside and outside that culture?

While a thorough history of Latter-day Saint artistry in the media arts is beyond the scope of this work,[5] even a cursory review of filmmaking contributions by Latter-day Saints paints a vivid, if peculiar, picture of our artistic heritage and inclinations. Among other things, it reveals that the

historical struggles faced by LDS filmmakers and audiences bear in many respects a striking resemblance to those that have often been encountered in Iran. Of course, any study of such resemblances could easily run the risk of overextending the parallels and minimizing the many mitigating factors that might complicate it, not least of which is the significant difference in potential talent and resources available to even a small nation in contrast to those available within a relatively minor and increasingly dispersed religious subculture. Nevertheless, it is the presumption of this study that a conservative and guarded analysis, despite its limitations, might at minimum offer us valuable insights into our own artistic tendencies and aspirations, as well as an opportunity to learn from the many instructive similarities and differences that can legitimately be drawn between our respective cinematic traditions. It might also help us better understand how LDS filmmakers and audiences can work more earnestly toward what Spencer W. Kimball described as the rich promise of an artistic community in which we should be "peers or superiors to any others"—a community at once carefully and reflectively attuned to spiritual truths, passionately committed to realizing the sublime power of great art, and "never satisfied with mediocrity."[6]

In an attempt to ground such an analysis on concrete criticism rather than abstract theory, we will begin by comparing the opening scenes of a recently made and artfully realized Mormon feature film with an Iranian movie of equitable credentials and see what those respective excerpts reveal to us about the artistic complexity and aesthetic approach of each work.

Artistry and Aesthetics in *The Best Two Years*

A standout example from the last decade's deluge of commercial features aimed at an ordinary LDS movie-going audience is *The Best Two Years,* directed by Scott S. Anderson and released in 2004. It was among the more popular Mormon movies at the box office, and although it is no art-house film, it is certainly artful, as evidenced not only by its impressive production values and studio-level development, but also by the fact that it is one of the few Mormon commercial films to date singled out as artistically praiseworthy both by critics and by other LDS filmmakers.[7]

The Best Two Years opens with an establishing shot of Amsterdam. As the credits roll, we hear the following lyrics sung with a curiously incongruous country-western twang: "Mama makes the best fried chicken. / Wrangler makes the best blue jeans. / Everybody knows Oklahoma / makes the very best football teams. / I believe that the Mormons / make the very best pioneers, / so I'm going to the land of the tulips, / where I'm gonna make

the best two years." Beautifully framed shots of Dutch rooftops, windmills, and canal boats segue to a close-up on a dark suit and an unmistakable LDS missionary name-tag. An older man readily identifiable as a mission president shakes hands with an equally recognizable elder, whose face we do not immediately see. The anonymous missionary boards a train and awkwardly searches for a place to sit. While he stumbles down the aisle, the camera shakily scans other passengers from his point-of-view (POV) until he finally finds a seat, after which a well-framed through-the-window shot maintains our bearings while showing the mission president waving from outside. Cued by that view, our perspective shifts back to the platform, where we watch the train pull away from the station. Further aerial shots of tulip fields and of the train speeding across a gorgeous European landscape are intercut with close-ups of the elder's hand writing in his journal. The music continues throughout and ends with the refrain: "I'll be ringing lots of doorbells. / I'll be talking in the street. / I'll be reaching with the spirit / every single person that I meet. . . . / Here in the land of the tulips, / I'll be knocking out my best two years." Another POV shot, this time of the elder in the train looking at his watch, gracefully cuts to a desk-top alarm clock in what is presumably his new missionary apartment. A sleepy missionary reaches over and turns it off before kneeling to pray. A second alarm clock rings, which a second missionary tries unsuccessfully to turn off and finally smashes in frustration on his nightstand before joining his companion for prayer. Clearly (at least to most Mormons), another new missionary has arrived in the field, and another new missionary day has been set in motion.

A beautifully framed through-the-window shot of a Dutch windmill from the opening scenes of *The Best Two Years.*

Elders John Rogers (K. C. Clyde) and Hezekiah Calhoun (Kirby Heyborne) walk home from the train station through a postcard landscape.

What can we say specifically about the artistry of this beginning? First, while charming and engaging, it plays out strictly by the numbers. A beautifully filmed, though thoroughly conventional, series of extreme long shots establish the location of the story. Key characters are sequentially introduced as conventional continuity cuts smoothly stitch together postcard landscapes and character details. The POV shots simultaneously identify the mission president for subsequent scenes and cleverly hide the identity of the new elder—presumably so we can all sympathize more easily with him and later be amused by his ungainly appearance and tonally discordant behavior. The timepiece shots are also well-crafted and edited, but they trade on stereotypical views of missionaries rising early for prayer and end with an exaggerated smash-the-alarm-clock sequence that is disappointingly clichéd. The strained comic tone and slightly slapstick antics continue throughout the film, being half-heartedly replaced by a semiserious turn of events only during the final moments of the story, when one of the elders belatedly rediscovers why he first became a missionary and thereby redeems an otherwise disappointing mission. Generally speaking, then, the movie is artfully realized and professionally crafted—the writing, casting, directing, production design, cinematography, music, acting, and editing all contribute to a coherent, interesting, and entertaining movie with no glaring flaws. And yet the movie is also a study in contradictions, both in its conception and in its realization. While there is much to laugh about in missionary life, the humor in *The Best Two Years*—as in

virtually all Mormon comedies to date—relies almost entirely on farcical acting and on the inherent amusement to be found in familiar cultural oddities, rather than on a clever and original narrative, subtle anticipatory setups, insightful close-to-the-lens performances, or the many other possibilities exploited by master comedians. And there is far too much cheap comedy in *The Best Two Years* for a film that wants to end on a dramatic and redemptive note. In addition, audiences are constantly assailed by music, lyrics, and dialogue that set a tone and narrative pace inconsistent with the subject matter the film eventually tries to develop. Even the title of the film belies the fact that were we to measure the amount of time actually devoted therein to oversleeping, arguing with companions, wasting time, pulling practical jokes, and lamenting lost girlfriends, in contrast to time spent on any spiritually edifying labor, the film would be more truthfully titled *The Best Two Weeks.*

How should we describe the aesthetic of such a work and others like it? After an over-long series of comic episodes meant mostly to evoke familiar recollections from former missionaries, the story unfolds as do most Hollywood narratives, in accordance with what has come to be called the "classical paradigm"—essentially, a quasi-Aristotelian progression through complications and rising action to a climactic and presumably cathartic resolution. Though the sumptuous cinematography is perhaps the most praiseworthy feature of *The Best Two Years,* elemental concerns like camera angles, shot composition, and lighting seem staid and insensitive to the individual characters and their situations—either that, or the

This exaggerated smash-the-alarm-clock sequence is an example of a strained comic tone that is inconsistent with the subject matter of a film that wants to end on a dramatic and redemptive note.

director and actors were unresponsive to the possibilities opened to them by the director of photography. The editing consists almost entirely of continuity cuts, cut-away and cut-to transitions, classical emphasis edits, and scene shifts. Revelatory and synergistic mise-en-scène is virtually nonexistent. In sum, when considered from an aesthetic point of view, the film is essentially a series of nicely photographed albeit loosely and formulaically connected sight gags, comic anecdotes, and dramatic interludes with no cogent understanding of what artistic end the film should realize or what means would be best employed in doing so.

LDS columnist Eric Snyder's movie review describes *The Best Two Years* as "*God's Army* without the melodrama." He writes, "Its characters are Mormon missionaries who are ordinary and therefore relatable. Their stories are commonplace, especially to anyone who has been a missionary, but they are told with insight and compassion."[8] There are commonplace elements to be sure: the meager apartment and dreadful diet, the challenging companions and constant rejection, the longing for home, the hunger for mail—and, of course, the peculiar but strangely universal missionary lingo. And the film is indeed story driven, though the story here is less a coherent narrative structure than a string of recollected or imagined missionary episodes. But whatever insight or compassion we might attribute to such a story was achieved with much more honesty and artistry in *God's Army* (2000), despite its questionable melodrama. So in the end, any aesthetic we might attribute to *The Best Two Years* can only be a borrowed, albeit tamed, Hollywood aesthetic: the story reigns supreme,

Elders Calhoun and Rogers pose for a snapshot as new missionary companions.

attempts at real artistry are restricted to the acting, and while the subject matter is unquestionably Mormon, all the cinematic conventions used to tell that story (even the characters themselves) are familiar to the point of being trivial, and they are employed without any apparent regard for their dialectical relation to the story or its theme. Though a pleasant movie, *The Best Two Years* speaks with no unique voice either for LDS culture or for its director, and it wrestles with no really significant issues. If it offers any novel or profound insights about its missionary subject matter, about Mormon culture as a whole, or about life in general, they are not obvious. This is not to say it is a bad film, for it does evoke shared memories and familiar sentiments in a charming and entertaining way. But that success does not negate the fact that the film's artistry is pedestrian and its aesthetic is discordantly derivative. Likewise, most other recent Mormon films we might consider (including those made specifically for the Church, like Kieth Merrill's *Legacy* [1990] and *The Testaments* [2000], as well as virtually all recent efforts at Mormon comedy) also problematically adopt their various underdeveloped and ambivalently derivative aesthetic sensitivities almost entirely from run-of-the-mill Hollywood sources.[9]

As these somewhat disappointing observations underscore—and as our talented and award-winning acting and animation students at Brigham Young University have proven time and again—we are (almost disconcertingly) good at mastering the methods and appropriating the aesthetic values of the movie industry at large. Unfortunately, we have proven ourselves much less adept at finding unique artistic voices for ourselves (though films like *New York Doll* and *Napoleon Dynamite* have made admirable progress in this regard) or at creating artworks that deserve critical acclaim, much less invite genuine study and emulation. And yet, if an appreciation for pretty pictures, a reliance on borrowed Hollywood conventions, and an admirable desire to tell various chapters of "the Mormon story" in a family-friendly though formulaic and derivative way is insufficient to constitute a meaningful aesthetic genuinely suited to the spiritual concerns and profound themes we so want to explore, then what more *is* required to reach that goal?

Artistry and Aesthetics in *The Color of Paradise*

By way of a tentative answer to that query, let us contrast *The Best Two Years* with *The Color of Paradise,* an Iranian work directed by Majid Majidi and released in 1999. Like Scott Anderson, Majidi is no art-house director. In fact, he has been almost universally overlooked by serious scholars infatuated with more formalistic and art-crowd-oriented Iranian

Fully two and a quarter minutes into *The Color of Paradise,* the first visual image appears—a tape player with numerous cassettes strewn across a blanket. An adult hand ejects a tape and hands it to a blind child.

directors like Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, even though Majidi's work has garnered numerous national and international awards. Like Anderson, Majidi focuses his lens on issues of interest to ordinary Iranians and on the spiritual life of regular people. And like Anderson, Majidi is popular among homefront audiences (his more recent film, *The Willow Tree* [2005], reportedly achieved in Iran the highest box office grosses of any Iranian feature film to that point).[10] But the similarities between these Mormon and Iranian films and filmmakers end there.

As the opening credits of *The Color of Paradise* appear in white script against a completely black screen, we hear crackly Persian music and the sound of a cassette player being repeatedly opened and closed. More music and spoken selections follow, while a voice asks the owner of each tape to identify himself. Aside from the credits, we still see nothing; it is fully two and a quarter minutes into the film before an actual image appears—an overhead shot of the tape player we have apparently been hearing, along with numerous cassette tapes scattered across a blanket. An adult's hand reaches down from the top of the screen and ejects the tape that is playing. As he holds out the cassette, an adult asks, "Whose voice is this on the tape?" A child's hand reaches up from the bottom right of the screen. "My grandmother's," a boy answers as he takes the cassette from the man's hand. We then see a close-up of the boy's face. He is obviously blind. His name, we soon learn, is Mohammad.

With originality and a dialectical reciprocity between content and communication, the beginning of this film establishes a cinematic sensitivity

thoughtfully attuned to a blind boy's inability to see, an inability that can only be treated ironically in an artistic medium which by its nature privileges the very sense the protagonist lacks. The film starts in the prolonged darkness that constitutes the defining trait of Mohammad's world. That the first images *we* see should be those of sound-making machinery and the hands of eight disabled children groping in the shadowy half-light of a school for the blind elegantly alerts us to the sensual parameters of Mohammad's existence. That the adult hand of the teacher should descend into the film frame from above (with a trajectory and certainty known only by those who can see) and should be met from below by the trusting fingers of a blind child (which enter the frame uncertainly and from the darkest corner of the screen) subtly foreshadows the thematic complexity and religious tensions of the plot. The story revolves around three principal figures: a father whose eyes function perfectly but whose heart is blinded by his myopic selfishness and burdensome misfortunes; a boy whose eyes are veiled by physical deformities but whose perfect heart is constantly overflowing with love and tenderness—even while his mind is tormented with the fear that his blindness is a mechanism God employs to hide himself and the beauty of his creations from Mohammad's longing but impotent reach; and a God who remains invisible to us all except at the moment of our death, though his hand occasionally reaches down from above to supply with loving care our needs and blind longings.

The character of this child and the itinerary of his spiritual journey are both established in short order. After long, tearful hours spent waiting for his father to retrieve him from school—long after all the other children have been tenderly reunited with their parents and taken home—Mohammad hears a newly hatched bird peeping under the leaves. Having endured his wait in heartbreaking solitude, his ears are acutely attuned to cries that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Hands outstretched, he stumbles off the safety of the pavement, chases away a prowling cat, and then gropes among the leaves and debris at his feet to find the baby bird, which he places in the pocket of his shirt and laboriously struggles to return to its nest, sightlessly and painfully fighting his way up through the branches of the tree from which it fell.

As the narrative fully develops, we realize that this scene functions as a subtle metaphor for the relationship between God and little Mohammad, who in the end is similarly rescued by God, but who remains—until that rescue—as blind to God's providential care as the baby bird was to Mohammad's own intervention. In the movie's pivotal scene, shortly before his father initiates a journey that will endanger Mohammad's life,

Mohammad sightlessly gropes among the leaves and debris at his feet to find a baby bird that has fallen from its nest.

Mohammad tearfully confides his most intimate fears to a blind carpenter into whose care he has been abandoned:

> Nobody loves me. . . . They all run away from me because I'm blind. If I could see, I would go to the local school with other children, but now I have to go to the school for the blind on the other side of the world. Our teacher says that God loves the blind more because they can't see, but I told him if it were so, he would not make us blind so that we can't see him.

The carpenter listens sympathetically to Mohammad's tortured reflections, and after a long, troubled silence he tells Mohammad that his teacher was right. And yet as the carpenter soberly retreats, we see in his face what Mohammad cannot—that the adult blindly wrestles with feelings and doubts every bit as painful and confusing as those of the child.

The Color of Paradise, like *Saints and Soldiers* and *New York Doll,* is a film that is spiritually uplifting and genuinely moving. But it surpasses those admirable films by raising questions about God and religious belief in ways that are from the start artistically and dialectically determined in direct relation to the questions themselves—thereby suggesting (though never forcing) equally profound and artistically satisfying answers. And unlike many Mormon movies that try to address religious issues effectively, *The Color of Paradise* refuses to pander to preconceived audience expectations or resort to manipulative sentimentality and referenced emotions in order to drive home a scripted point. Through theme-appropriate

cinematography and music; symbolic uses of color, sound, and imagery; and convincing portrayals of layered and complex characters, this film reveals a world in which an invisible God is nevertheless believably omnipresent and omnibenevolent, and it portrays that world in ways that unobtrusively disclose God's hand to viewers if not to the characters themselves. While it is at times stunningly beautiful to watch, none of the actors, sets, or locations betrays a hint of artificiality or beauty for beauty's sake; Majidi employs sumptuous photography only when he clearly wants us to appreciate what his blind protagonist cannot—as evidenced by the visually dreary opening sequence and the monochromatically filmed scenes underscoring the father's drab spiritual outlook on life. What little music there is in *The Color of Paradise* is tonally compatible with the other filmic elements and never functions as a spiritual crutch or emotional cue card. It is heard only briefly and at four strategic moments in the narrative; the remainder of the soundtrack is dialogue and ordinary ambient noise, some of it (like certain bird calls) emphasized for thematic effect, but never in discordant ways. The characters brought to life by the largely nonprofessional actors are so effective we forget they are fictional. There are no gratuitous displays of glossy production values or manipulative cinematic techniques, no tonal inconsistencies or appeals to provincial prejudices, and no references to privileged information that would alienate or confuse non-Muslims. The film's appeal is universal, and yet the story it tells does not span the Muslim universe or feel at all contrived—it limits itself to the exposition of a thematically delimited plot peopled by protagonists whose challenges and responses are not pedagogically imposed from without but internally decided by and from within the narrative itself. In short, *The Color of Paradise* exhibits a consistent, coherent, and fully developed spiritual aesthetic in which Majidi supplements artistic norms common to the moral-fable genre of Iranian films with project-specific stylistic devices chosen to evoke blindness, to accentuate those visual experiences inaccessible to the blind, and to emphasize the moral and psychological conflicts naturally produced as the major characters each grapple with what they can and cannot see. That aesthetic is philosophically grounded in clear convictions about the nature and relation of God to his creations, and it is artistically grounded in a hard-won understanding of how to articulate those convictions cinematically.

As a result, *The Color of Paradise* is not a film we can escape into for either mere entertainment or pure pedagogy; it is a film that provokes us ethically and troubles the security of our spiritual complacency. It is a film that encourages us by its honesty and simplicity to evaluate our own relationships and moral choices. In sum, it is a film that invites us

to goodness like the gentle parables spoken by the Master Teacher of the New Testament. And it succeeds where other overtly propagandistic films fail because it is not sentimental but sentient, not didactic but dialectical. The guiding choices made by Majidi and his production crew clearly grew out of an informed reflection upon the holistic relationship between the film's *content*—the visuals, the soundtrack, the narrative, and the spiritual truths they and the other filmic elements are each meant to convey—and the *manner* in which those various elements should evolve, intertwine, and synergistically inform each other. In other words, *The Color of Paradise* is the artistic result of an educated and deeply spiritual reflection upon the *medium* of film itself and the relation of that medium to the spiritual *message* the film wants to communicate (which the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel claimed to be the task of any great art).

Contemporary Mormon Filmmaking

This preliminary analysis raises the question: Why was this film made by an Iranian Muslim and not a Utah Mormon? What critical differences can account for the fact that, while Iranians persistently suffered seemingly insurmountable political and religious impediments to filmmaking that Latter-day Saints did not, Iranian directors literally rose from the ashes of revolution to take the artistic world by storm, while only a few LDS film directors have sporadically earned any real critical acclaim? Why have so many contemporary (including some award-winning) LDS filmmakers subsequently squandered that hard-earned capital on culturally introverted and artistically disappointing projects, while many Iranian filmmakers succeed despite (and sometimes, because of) the overtly religious perspectives and culturally distinct features inherent in their films?

One such difference is that LDS filmmakers who are committed to exploring cultural issues and religious topics have to date focused myopically on stories, themes, and rhetoric that have appealed *only* to Mormons—and in many cases, only to a *select group* of Mormons. This must change. And it probably will change (by necessity if not by choice) as the market becomes saturated with tired, low-budget comedies and with preachy, propagandistic, and parochial films that emotionally move audiences only by evoking established beliefs and sentiments rather than by developing characters and stories that naturally and fairly stir spiritual dispositions.[11] We already have examples of films that have attempted to break this mold: as Latter-day Saints we clearly recognize aspects of our own culture in the previously mentioned *Saints and Soldiers* and *Napolean Dynamite,* for instance, although neither of these films addresses itself

to an exclusively LDS audience or speaks with a voice that alienates non-LDS viewers.[12] And to say we should generally aim at a wider audience does not mean, of course, that we should never directly explore aspects of Mormon culture or religious belief. *New York Doll* and *The Other Side of Heaven* directly tackled LDS subjects and featured LDS protagonists, and both films elicited almost universally positive responses. Iranian cinema has shown that cultural and religious differences can even work to a film's advantage, since people are naturally interested in the unfamiliar when it is presented in a sympathetic and comprehensible way. Our cultural heritage can provide us with a multitude of themes, genres, and modes of expression that are fresh and effective. Iranians have favorably exploited their own exotic culture and history in the development of widely appealing genres such as social realism and moral fables. They have also frequently constructed clever films around children in order to explore with innocence and subtlety sensitive issues that would probably have involved profanity or depictions of sex and violence had those same issues been dealt with in realistic films about adults. We could likewise draw on our own rich heritage and culture (as LDS painters, writers, and poets have already done) in searching for innovative and uplifting ways to develop our singular voice and to find modes and matters of cinematic expression unique to us but appealing to others.

A second difference is the unfortunate and widespread attitude that even now prevails among many educated Church members: that while successful labor in the technical arts and blue-collar trades obviously requires specialized training and preparation (even more so in the scientific and mathematical disciplines), success in humanistic ventures like teaching and filmmaking needs only hard work, righteous living, and a modicum of introductory instruction. Even today we often fallaciously assume that at most an aspiring filmmaker might need to learn from the world the practical fundamentals of his or her specific task, but a thorough and penetrating knowledge of cinematic traditions, artistic approaches, and critical theories need not be pursued—and *should* not be pursued where those traditions, approaches, and theories include artworks and movements of ostensibly questionable moral worth or of a demanding intellectual nature. LDS filmmakers *en masse* have yet to invest the time and labor needed to play an informed and compelling part on the world stage. Mormon audiences and filmmakers alike need to acquire a passionate understanding of film *as art,* not just as a means of idle entertainment, personal expression, or religious commentary and apologetics. We also need to resist our evident penchant for tackling projects beyond our current resources or preparation.

Those attitudes are now slowly changing in some circles in ways *de facto* if not *de jure* by the simple fact that LDS Church membership today is so large and diverse that professionally accredited and highly educated Latter-day Saints are now proportionately numerous and influential. And yet the many disappointing Mormon films that have been made in the wake of *God's Army,* Richard Dutcher's debut effort, suggest that far too many aspiring LDS movie producers and directors are still falling prey to that sad assumption—in part, perhaps, because so many of our local filmmakers have been trained within an artistic culture that is historically haunted by those attitudes.[13]

Happily, however, a select few LDS filmmakers have produced quality films despite their limited experience and resources. Ryan Little's *Saints and Soldiers*, Jared Hess's *Napoleon Dynamite*, and Greg Whiteley's *New York Doll* are all standout examples of critical and financial success stories in Mormon cinema.[14] Cleverly employing World War II re-enactors and shooting at Utah locations, Ryan Little made the impressive *Saints and Soldiers* for less than a million dollars and won more than a dozen awards from small, mostly family-film-oriented film festivals for his effort. *Napoleon Dynamite,* similarly shot on a shoestring budget, not only generated an astronomical return on its investment but also garnered almost as many nominations and wins as did Little's film, and several of them were from major festivals and award programs such as the Sundance Film Festival and the Grammy Awards. *New York Doll* earned two award nominations (one for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance), and it was the most spiritually moving film of the three. Certainly, one of the primary reasons why all of these films reached wide audiences, returned a profit, and won significant awards is that all three were sensitively written and filmed in such a way as to generate universal interest and cross-cultural appeal, rather than being aimed at an exclusive and critically undemanding provincial audience. But another reason is that all of them were small-scale projects conceived and carried out within the well-considered capabilities of their respective filmmakers, instead of grandiose enterprises with unrealistic aims or expectations.

Said differently, in addition to mastering the techniques of the trade, LDS filmmakers need to develop an impeccable knowledge of the language, conventions, and theories of film that constitute its artistic essence and history. We also need to collaborate and communicate more effectively and frequently, contributing to film literature and perhaps even forming a society and publishing a journal of our own, thereby nourishing a true community of filmmakers, and not just a collection of artists loosely allied under a broad banner of overlapping religious beliefs and professional

aspirations (the LDS Film Festival and its sponsored projects constitute a noteworthy step in this direction). Some of the fault for our past failures in these areas lies with well-meaning filmmakers who were simply more invested in making films than in learning about them, but fault also lies with teachers, mentors, and institutions more committed to graduating filmmakers and completing projects than in providing genuine education and demanding uncompromising artistry. Much of the fault also lies with LDS audiences willing and sometimes eager to patronize and thereby perpetuate shoddy and undemanding artistry.

Iranian Filmmaking

Although Iranians have struggled with the same limited resources that Latter-day Saints have often wrestled and contended with (as well as formidable social and political challenges, the likes of which have not plagued Mormons since the turn of the twentieth century), a critical core of Iranian filmmakers was prepared to rise to the occasion when opportunities to artistically flourish presented themselves, whereas the bulk of LDS filmmakers was not.

The trajectory of filmmaking artistry in Iran has since World War II followed a slowly ascending arc with two remarkable spikes: one peaking around the early 1970s and then dropping down during the late '70s and early '80s; another beginning in 1995 and climbing steeply during the next few years toward a peak it has apparently not yet reached. Were we to plot this spiky climb on a graph, it would loosely parallel a plot of the increasing number of Iranian artists who have been educated by foreign universities and programs or by domestic schools patterned after foreign models—all of which feature curricula stressing an absolute mastery of history, artistry, and theory as well as craft. Such a plot would also parallel charts tracking the availability of generous government and institutional economic support from which those artists have often benefited (despite periods of government and religious restrictions) and the increasing number of international awards and recognitions earned by the more competitive Iranian filmmakers. Let us see why this is so.

The auspicious beginning of Iranian filmmaking marked by the 1932 film *Haji Aqa* was soon thereafter sabotaged by the very circumstances that had made it possible. As artistic freedom and market choices increased in Iran, artistic quality of the films produced therein initially decreased. With the exception of an unusually sophisticated and rich documentary filmmaking tradition (launched and nurtured, ironically enough, by the U.S. government and, later, Syracuse University),[15] Persian

language feature films during the Pahlavi period of 1926–78 only sporadically showed signs of realizing their initial promise. In a concise albeit overstated summary, Richard Tapper notes that "nothing of distinction—nothing worthy of being called 'national cinema'—was produced [in Iran] until after the Second World War. For many years, the films shown publicly [in Iran] were mostly dubbed imports; local productions were imitations of Indian, Egyptian and other foreign films, the most popular being what became known as the *film farsi* genre."[16] Then, too, right up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, ideological intervention by a monarchy committed to increasing nationalist pride, encouraging veneration of the Shah, and adopting pro-Western ideals no doubt also took its toll on artistic achievement, as did inflexible censorship of content. But evidence suggests that market forces and community preferences played a more pivotal role in this series of events than scholars have thus far acknowledged (since neither censorship nor renewed government manipulation *after* the Islamic Revolution prevented Iranians from making great films).

Mohammad Ali Issari observes that as theaters proliferated in Iran during the period of Persian talkies, they became divided into two general groups. There were those that catered to more elite, educated tastes by showing literary adaptations, Hollywood studio films, European art films, and other films with a predominantly Western flair—in short, movies that satisfied the demands of a more critical eye. Then there were those, much larger in number, that appealed to less literate audiences by charging cheaper admission prices and showing Indian- and Persian-language low-budget films, serials, comedies, action-adventure movies, and other products that reflected familiar and provincial practices, offered escapist entertainment, and made virtually no critical demands on their viewers. Issari claims that while more sophisticated Iranian audiences generally rejected these early Persian-language films because of their poor technical quality and trite subject matter, those who spoke only Persian and lacked the formal education to assess a film's artistic flaws embraced the locally produced films. He also persuasively argues that this very division exacerbated the problem of poor-quality fiction-film production in Iran, and for some time the failure of cinema-goers to demand better quality films contributed to the stunted growth of its fledgling film industry.[17] Regardless of precisely which factors were more or less influential, the point deserving emphasis is this (and herein lies a significant lesson for our own LDS moviemakers and audiences): Iranian moviegoers themselves were largely to blame for the mediocre indigenous cinema of the pre-Islamic Revolution years; by patronizing and tolerating mediocre local films, they helped shape a culture and an economy which encouraged and perpetuated that

very mediocrity. As cultural expectations and critical demands on Iranian artists began to increase in the decade preceding the Islamic revolution of 1979, so too did the quality of their cinema arts.

Film exhibition and production in Iran was dealt a serious blow by the wave of fundamentalist opposition unleashed in the wake of the Islamic Revolution, which had its roots in events that began in the mid-twentieth century and resulted in the theocracy of the Ayatollah Khomeini almost twenty years later in 1979.[18] By 1980, as many as 180 cinemas across Iran had been burned or shut down, 32 in Tehran alone, and many gifted Iranian moviemakers and actors had become tragic casualties of the new, revolutionary government's repressive practices and strict censorship measures.[19] These tragic facts notwithstanding, it is important to note (especially for LDS filmmakers and audiences) that virtually every one of the few really memorable films made after 1931 and before the 1979 revolution were made when Iranian directors began realizing the cinematic vision of *Haji Aqa* by *reacting against* the slew of frivolous and derivative movies that had to that point dominated the market, and by *turning to* subjects and issues of moral and social worth. In other words, the artistic freedom enjoyed by Iranian artists prior to the revolution did not of itself produce great art—and, as we will see, nor did serious restrictions on that freedom after the revolution prevent its production.

The first sustained *artistic* movement in Iranian cinema history was the aptly named Iranian New Wave, which crested between about 1971 and 1978 but began with a rising tide of social realist concerns and nonformulaic plots exemplified by a handful of films stretching from the late 1950s to the late 1960s and strengthened with a swelling move away from the glossy production values of imported mass-market movies and their Iranian copies. And yet New Wave filmmakers represented no homogenous group or single ideology. Many of them were educated abroad and brought to their productions a sophisticated understanding of cinema history and conventions. Some were self-taught amateurs who learned their craft through personal study of foreign-film masterpieces and the movies of their educated peers. Many were highly individualistic *auteurs*. Some were collaborative team players, breaking strict *auteur* parameters by working with talented writers and thinkers outside the filmmaking profession who were able to contribute a self-critical eye, an understanding of psychology and philosophy, and a penchant for narrative innovation that classically trained filmmakers often lacked.

While there were certainly many significant contributing factors to the success of Iranian New Wave films and other standout Iranian movies from the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s—such as state sponsorship[20]

and filmmaking societies[21]—the primary qualities that ultimately garnered them international critical praise were their directors' historically informed contributions to cinema style, genre, and narrative technique; their insistence on morally meaningful themes; and their passionate commitment to the seriousness of their art. For instance, Naficy describes the New Wave movement as "essentially a 'cinema of discontent,' whose realistic and often critical assessment of contemporary social conditions, expressed through allegory and symbolism, contradicted the aims of its sponsors."[22] While this is indeed true in some cases, it was a "cinema of discontent" in another, more essential sense: the Iranian New Wave evolved as a reasoned rejection of prevailing modes of filmmaking artistry—it largely abandoned Hollywood and European studio conventions, and it repeatedly broke new ground and challenged audiences to evolve along with the art rather than content themselves with movies that made no hermeneutic or philosophical demands, provoked no critical reflection, and occasioned no moral or spiritual insights. It did not challenge or provoke viewers for the sake of mere challenge or provocation, however; successful disruptions of the cinematic *status quo* from the 1960s to the 1980s operated in the *service* of art, not in its stead. Just as these were the true defining traits of Iran's first great masterpieces, it is no surprise that they are the traits inherited and embellished by Iranian filmmakers currently earning acclaim.

The hard-won artistic progress of Iranian international cinema can be gauged to some degree by an exhaustive search of U.S. film distribution company catalogues, which turns up no Iranian films in U.S. distribution besides 1969's *The Cow* until Icarus International obtained Mehrjui's 1974 *The Mina Cycle* for a 1979 release.[23] There then followed a relatively long stretch of time without any new Iranian features reaching the U.S. market. But all that changed in 1995, when Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* won the *Camera D'Or* at the Festival du Cannes and October Films began distributing it the following year. Then, in 1997 the prestigous Cannes *Palme D'Or* was awarded to Abbas Kiarostami for *A Taste of Cherry,* and Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* became the first Iranian film nominated for an Academy Award. And in a story right out of *Haji Aqa,* New Yorker Films acquired for their 1998 catalogue the 1996 film *Gabbeh* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, of whom Gerald Peary later wrote, "Makhmalbaf . . . is atoning for his dour, puritanical adolescence when, under the spell of his religious Moslem grandmother, he rejected cinema as unholy stuff, and spent five years imprisoned by the Shah as a fundamentalist terrorist. How transformed is he? 'When I first saw [Wim Wenders's] Wings of Desire, I wished that my grandmother were still alive so that I could show her that

not all movies take you to hell,' he explained in a 1995 interview. 'There are some that can take you to Paradise.'"[24]

Appropriately, audiences can now say the same thing about the films of Makhmalbaf himself, as well as of Panahi, Kiarostami, Majidi, and other Iranian directors. During the last decade or so, as Iranian productions began winning one prestigious international award after another, the distribution market witnessed a veritable avalanche of Iranian cinematic accomplishments.[25] Moreover, this astonishing streak continues unabated today: it increased under President Mohammad Khatami's reforms, which eased some of the more draconian Khomeini restrictions with which previous filmmakers had to struggle; and while the current Ahmadinejad administration has backpedaled in many ways since taking control of Iran in 2005, Iranian filmmakers accustomed to a generation of artistic freedom and international acclaim have stubbornly sought innovative ways to circumvent or work within renewed hard-line restrictions and thereby maintain the quality, if not the quantity of artistic Iranian films during the Khatami period. (It remains to be seen what lasting effects Ahmadinejad policies may have, but there may be positive results among them, as a troubling number of Iranian films produced immediately prior to the 2005 change in government had begun surrendering to the seductive allure of relaxed moral standards, especially regarding sex and profanity.) During his remarks at the opening gala of the 1995 Telluride Film Festival, the world-famous German director Werner Herzog made the following prediction, "What I say tonight will be a banality in the future. The greatest films of the world today are being made in Iran."[26] His prediction has proved entirely correct. Every year, Iranian films broach new territory and win more prestigious awards. They are perennially among the most popular films to play the international film festival circuit—and this despite the fact that they are often unapologetically religious and almost always culturally insightful and philosophically demanding.

Lessons To Be Learned

If the LDS filmmaking community hopes to awaken the interest and earn the respect of worldwide viewers and scholars, effectively compete in the worldwide movie market, help repair a morally troubled movie industry, and thereby nurture the pride, expectations, and intellectual sophistication of our own LDS movie-going public, we must develop filmmakers and media and entertainment professionals of all types who can create, recognize, produce, and sell great films. Among the many lessons we might specifically learn from Iranian films and film history is that

movie artistry and appreciation within a culture is perhaps best developed when a critical mass of passionate filmmakers not only addresses timely and meaningful issues in distinctive, insightful ways, but when those artists assiduously study and engage the artistic history, conventions, and masters of world cinema and consequently produce films that manifest that engagement, speak with a distinct aesthetic voice, and artistically educate audiences (both inside and outside their own culture) to appreciate and expect artistic excellence. Obviously, not every Iranian film is deserving of praise; like every other culture, Iran has produced a plethora of poor-quality moviemakers and movies. But as we have glimpsed, it has also produced some impeccably educated masters and true movie masterpieces, and it is this latter pair of accomplishments (first recognized *outside* Iranian culture) that has earned Iran its world-class filmmaking reputation and accustomed discerning audiences *within* Iran to expect and appreciate quality art from its own artists, thereby increasing and further developing a sustainable pool of critical viewers. And while it is true that only a small percentage of any particular culture's filmmakers will create artistically groundbreaking movies or perform in a register that earns accolades from national and international audiences, those elite and committed filmmakers are absolutely essential in nurturing the pride, expectations, and intellectual sophistication of a culture's filmmaking community and movie-going public. They are equally essential in awakening the interest of renowned critics, scholars, and fellow filmmakers from whom peer response and recognition must come if any culture's cinema is to reach its full artistic potential or participate meaningfully in the movie arts.

As the plot and characters of *Haji Aqa* suggest (and as the history of Iranian cinema demonstrates), Iranian filmmakers and audiences have often walked a veritable tightrope between the demands of religious orthodoxy and embattled cultural identity at one extreme and an uncommon zeal for artistic creativity and self-expression at the other. Partly in response to this tension, the more gifted and committed Iranian artists have devoted themselves to making movies that are both entertaining and spiritually enlightening. The peculiar demands imposed on Iranian cinema since the Islamic Revolution seem to have worked to its eventual advantage, fostering a climate among serious artists in which frivolous and self-indulgent filmmaking has been unthinkable, and in which artistic subtlety and originality has been the norm. As critics and industry insiders everywhere were predicting that Khomeini's imposition of harsh censorship tactics and repressive Islamic codes of conduct would spell the death of Iranian cinema, Iranian filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami astutely mused that laboring within limitations rather than combating or lamenting them,

could work in one's favor by encouraging creative solutions. He compared his own struggle to make films with that of an architect forced to build on crooked plots of ground: such circumstances don't necessarily prevent building, he observed; they simply require more imaginative designs and innovative responses to the challenges of difficult terrain.[27] LDS filmmakers need to adopt a similar attitude. Only then will we realize President Kimball's prophetic vision of an artistic community that is the "peer or superior" to all others.

Travis T. Anderson (travis_anderson@byu.edu), Associate Professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University, regularly teaches film artistry and theory courses in addition to philosophy courses. He has mentored over twenty film projects for his students in advanced aesthetics and in the BYU Honors Program. He earned a BFA and a BA at BYU and an MA and PhD from Loyola University of Chicago. He directed the BYU International Cinema program from 2000 to 2006.

1. A succinct variation of this belief was expressed by Brigham Young during the dedication of the Salt Lake Theater on March 6, 1862: after lamenting the prejudice of many pious Christians against simple amusement, he preached that "there was nothing lovely in the world, nothing delightful, but the Lord had created it for the good of His children and that it was the abuse and not the proper use of anything that constituted evil." Helen Garrity, "The Theatre in Utah," in *Utah: A Centennial History*, ed. Wain Sutton, vol. 2 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1949), 1008–9. Speaking specifically of motion pictures, President David O. McKay reportedly shared a similar sentiment in 1956 after recording some narration for the film *Feed My Sheep*: "I am so glad the Church is utilizing these marvelous inventions for communication. I believe the Lord has provided these great inventions like the motion picture, television, radio, and such things. This is one of the ways in which the gospel message will go to all the world." Wetzel O. Whitaker, "Pioneering with Film: A History of Church and Brigham Young University Films," unpublished manuscript, iii, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

2. See http://www.audiencealliance.com/vvm.php.

3. A telling indication of how Utahns and Mormons have judged the quality of Mormon films to date can be found on the ldsfilm.com site, where twenty Mormon films from 2000 to 2005 are assigned a numerical score according to the various ratings they received in published movie reviews from five local newspapers: the highest rating assigned to any film on the list is only an 84 (*Saints and Soldiers,* 2003), while the average score is a dismal 57. LDS Cinema Table, http://ldsfilm.com/table.txt.

4. Travis T. Anderson, "Seeking after the Good in Art, Drama, Film, and Literature," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007): 231–46.

5. Virtually all significant early Utah film history yet carried out was researched and written during the early 1970s by a Brigham Young University student and faculty member named Richard Alan Nelson, and much of that

impressive work remains in fragmentary research notes and unpublished papers donated to the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University. The two exceptions are an impressive history of LDS film productions through the mid-1960s submitted as a master's thesis by another BYU student named David Kent Jacobs, and a brief summary of Jacobs's work, updated with a thesis-length personal history of Church and BYU film production from the 1950s through the 1970s, which was written and donated to the L. Tom Perry Special Collections by Wetzel O. ("Judge") Whitaker, the man who founded the LDS Motion Picture Studio and played a seminal role in nurturing the nascent BYU Theater Arts Department. A liberal recounting of the above-mentioned histories along with a provisional review of current developments can be found in Randy Astle, with Gideon Burton, "A History of Mormon Cinema," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007): 13–163.

6. Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," Brigham Young University Address, September 12, 1967, 14; excerpted and modified in "First Presidency Message: The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 2–5; reprinted in its entirety in John W. Welch and Don E. Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), 43–63.

7. Speaking to a BYU student reporter, LDS filmmaker Richard Dutcher reputedly described films like *The RM* (2003) and *The Home Teachers* (2004) as "mindless, trivial, numbing," but praised *The Best Two Years* as "wonderful for a Mormon family audience. . . . There's good stuff there." James Greaves, "Dutcher Foresees End of Genre He Fathered," *The Daily Universe,* February 1, 2006, 1. Though the movie broke no new ground and earned no major accolades, it did receive numerous favorable reviews, including those by Joe Leydon in *Variety* and Jeff Vice in the *Deseret Morning News,* who opined that it "not only reaches the bar [established by *God's Army* in 2000], but . . . actually sets it a little higher," standing "head and shoulders above the most recent crop of LDS features." Jeff Vice, "'Two Years' Serves Its Mission Well," *Deseret Morning News,* February 20, 2004, W4.

8. Eric D. Snyder, "The Best Two Years," online at http://www.ericdsnider.com/movies/the-best-two-years/.

9. On his Audience Alliance website, for instance, Kieth Merrill champions the timeworn adage of Hollywood's story-driven approach to filmmaking, an approach that routinely reduces or subjects every other cinematic consideration to the exposition of a formulaic plot, thereby eliminating out of hand the possibility of feature films (like those of Terrence Malick, Wong Kar Wai, Zhang Yimou—and virtually all renowned Iranian directors) in which mood, character, spiritual experience, or even truth can take precedence over story and dialogue. Merrill's mantra (borrowed from the likes of Hollywood screenwriting guru Robert McKee) is this: "To make a great movie there are three things that matter: Story! Story! Story!" While now acknowledging (perhaps in consequence of our November 15, 2007, BYU *Director's Cut* panel discussion on this very issue) that "great movies offer entertainment with virtues and values *embedded*," Merrill originally described his Audience Alliance Motion Picture Paradigm as "entertainment first, values *added*" (emphases mine). Regardless of whether Merrill has changed simply the wording of his web page or whether he has indeed changed his production philosophy, any "values added" approach suffers from at least two significant problems, since moral value is a function of everything constituting a

film, not just the way a film's story is told: First, not all great films are entertaining; many are sobering, thought provoking, or even troubling. Second, real values cannot be added to an artwork after the fact like icing on a cake; they must be dialectically integrated into the mix so they are present in every aspect of the film. Merrill's award-winning documentary and Imax films have always outperformed his cardboard-character, formula-driven fiction films precisely because they have not been structured by formulaic stories with values added or by "virtue and value" quotients and matrices. See "Values for Life: The Audience Alliance Values and Virtues Matrix," Audience Alliance Motion Picture Studio, http://www.audiencealliance.com/vvm.php.

10. By October 19, 2005, *The Willow Tree* had "surpassed 600,000 admissions to become the highest grossing drama ever in Iran." "Academy Award-Nominated Director Majid Majidi's 'The Willow Tree' Breaks Box Office Records to Become the Highest Grossing Drama in Iran," IndependentFilm.com, online at http://www.independentfilm.com/resources/academy-awardnominated-di.shtml. *The Color of Paradise* received numerous awards, including the Grand Prix at the 21st Montreal Festival for World Films, and was described by movie critic Roger Ebert as a family film that "shames the facile commercialism" of Hollywood family films. Ebert writes that Majidi's work "feels truly intended for God's glory, unlike so much 'religious art' that is intended merely to propagandize for one view of God over another. His film looks up, not sideways. In this and his previous film, the luminous Oscar nominee *Children of Heaven,* he provides a quiet rebuke to the materialist consumerism in Western films about children. . . . Because they do not condescend to young audiences, Majidi's films of course are absorbing for adults as well, and there is a lesson here: Any family film not good enough for grownups is certainly not good enough for children." Roger Ebert, "The Color of Paradise," June 2, 2000, online at http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20000602/REVIEWS/6020303.

11. This very point was eloquently made by Mitch Davis (director of *The Other Side of Heaven*) in an interview with the online Meridian Magazine: "The average movie in Hollywood costs $80 million to make and market today. Excluding *The Other Side of Heaven,* the average budget for LDS-themed movies over the last few years has been under $600,000. Until now it has been possible for movies made on those low budgets to succeed because of the curiosity and hunger of the LDS audience. But I think that curiosity is waning and the hunger is growing more selective. I think the LDS audience is going to become more discerning and more demanding. . . . I think the only way LDS filmmakers are going to begin making movies that cross over is if they are forced to make that kind of movie. If the LDS audience starts demanding that LDS filmmakers spend more money on their productions, those filmmakers will be forced to find additional audiences for those movies, which means they will begin to be more considerate of the cross over audience. . . Personally, I think we set the bar pretty low when we make movies about ourselves for ourselves, show them to ourselves in our local theaters, then congratulate ourselves. We can do better, and I think the realities of the market are going to force us to do better." "Mitch Davis on Mormon Movies," Meridian Magazine, online at http://www.meridianmagazine.com/arts/041015Mitchprint.html. Davis does not discuss the consequences of business ventures like Deseret Book Company's acquisition of Excel Entertainment, which might perpetuate the

production of mediocre Mormon movies by assuring their DVD distribution to a trusting LDS customer base.

12. It is worth citing at this juncture Hamid Reza Sadr's appraisal of Majidi's Academy Award winning *Children of Heaven* (1997), which in many regards mirrors Roger Ebert's review of *The Color of Paradise:* "Majidi's intense study of a family living in the grip of poverty is exaggerated in mood, but this is a work characterised by visual quality and emotional generosity, which impressed the Academy members. It offered an opportunity for international audiences to observe characters whose lives might be very different from their own but whose concerns are ultimately universal." Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 229.

13. The memoirs of former Disney Studios employee and LDS Motion Picture Studio founder Wetzel Whitaker reveal a distinct pattern to the productions during his tenure at BYU through the early 1970s—a pattern that in some critical respects is still followed today by many BYU-educated filmmakers. His two welfare films that launched postwar LDS filmmaking (*Church Welfare in Action* [1948] and *The Lord's Way* [1948]) were both made entirely by dedicated volunteer Church members possessing between them only a modicum of professional filmmaking experience. And while Whitaker gratefully acknowledged that BYU and the LDS Church were astonishingly helpful in supplying the necessary facilities and equipment to facilitate studio production (especially after the original BYU studio burned down in 1964), Whitaker also admitted that for years he struggled under constant pressure to accept projects effectively beyond his limited abilities, meager budget, inadequate equipment, and bare-bones facilities. More importantly, until he had himself trained a generation of filmmakers, he had to rely almost entirely on uneducated students, poorly paid personnel, and amateur actors, supplemented by only a cherished few professional associates—most of them with training in peripheral fields. Whitaker, "Pioneering with Film," 11; Wetzel O. Whitaker, interviewed by Thomas Cheney, July 30, 1985, recording transcript, 10–15, Perry Special Collections. For example, during his first several years at BYU, Whitaker's initial cameraman and only professionally trained assistant was a still photographer named Robert Stum, a person with no prior experience at all in motion picture work. On one occasion, Whitaker and his second cameraman (Frank Wise, former director of the Deseret Book film distribution unit) had so little experience between them that they failed to record a key scene on film because neither of them knew how to properly plug in a new camera (Whitaker, interview, 21–22).

Referring to this particularly discouraging period, when he was deliberating whether to quit the BYU assignment and resume work for Disney, Whitaker lamented that "it seemed as though we were the forgotten men who had been relegated to Siberia." Whitaker, "Pioneering with Film," 14. According to Whitaker, the primary problem during these "very, very" discouraging times was not simply a lack of resources, but a *lack of education*; he and his production crew lacked critical training, and so did the administrators and leaders to whom he had to report: "It was a tough assignment," he recalled. "I wondered sometimes what they wanted us up here for anyway to give us a roll of Kodachrome and go out and start shooting. Well, they didn't know what film making was like at all. They didn't have any idea. It was an educational problem." Whitaker, interview, 14.

Little by Little, Whitaker and his associates *did* acquire much of that needed education, but only through what he described as "on the job" training—as when Whitaker's crew was able to apprentice as it were with Disney layout man Kendall O'Connor while he was briefly hired to help out on *Man's Search for Happiness* (1964). Whitaker, interview, 18–19. And while they were slowly accruing experience and expertise, Whitaker's team produced some really exceptional work, *The Windows of Heaven* (1963) and *Man's Search for Happiness* being among the more notable successes (though the heavily edited and abridged version of *The Windows of Heaven* currently available on DVD preserves little of its original artistry, as does the remade *Man's Search for Happiness*). But it is nevertheless disappointing that from the beginning the Church could not invest the same kind of time and money in professionally educating its institutional filmmakers as it did its turn-of-the-century temple mural artists like John Hafen, who was among those sent on art missions to study painting in the ateliers of Paris at Church expense. See James B. Allen, "Education and the Arts in Twentieth-Century Utah," in *Utah's History,* ed. Richard D. Poll (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 602. Had it done so, the *artistic* history and heritage of Mormon filmmaking might now read very differently.

14. Since this article was written and first submitted to *BYU Studies* in 2006, several LDS commercial filmmakers have created exceptionally fine films. For instance, in 2008 Utah State University's Ashley Karras directed a first-rate documentary titled *The Inheritance of War,* about WWII's Bataan Death March survivors. In January 2009, Boston University student Kristal Williams-Rowley won the LDS Film Festival Short Film and Audience Choice awards with her stunning drama *Mind the Gap,* which she produced as her BU graduate student thesis project. And Christian Vuissa, founder of the LDS Film Festival, has made over the last few years—on remarkably small budgets—several intimate and moving portraits of LDS characters.

15. See Mohammad Ali Issari, *Cinema in Iran, 1900–1979* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 172, and Hamid Naficy, "Iranian Cinema," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film,* ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 136–39.

16. Richard Tapper, ed., *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 3. The vast majority of prerevolutionary Iranian films that *weren't* derivative (like an enormously popular series of *Luti* or "Tough Guy" films that played from 1958 through the late 1970s) were still considered meritless pabulum by most Iranian film scholars. So too, were the *Fardin* films. See Farzan Navab, "Farewell to Fardin," *The Iranian*, April 7, 2000, online at http://www.iranian.com/Arts/2000/April/Fardin.

17. Issari, *Cinema in Iran*, 65. Naficy agrees that most early Persian language films were "low-quality, formulaic and escapist," but he attributes those failings as much to strict state censorship and foreign competition as to what he calls "prevailing social and economic conditions." Naficy, "Iranian Cinema," 135.

18. For historical details, see Elton L. Daniel, *The History of Iran* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001); and Donald N. Wilber, *Iran, Past and Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

19. Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update," in Tapper, *New Iranian Cinema,* 30.

20. For instance, in 1983 the postrevolution Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance established the Farabi Cinematic Foundation, which produced a number of influential films about overtly spiritual themes—one of the finest being the 1985 film *Beyond the Mist*. For an extended discussion, see Sadr, *Iranian Cinema,* 182.

21. One of the best examples of such a syndicate was the self-organized Progressive Filmmaker's Society formed in 1973 by Dariush Mehrjui (director of *The Cow* [1969], which is generally considered to be Iran's first real art film) and fourteen other notable Iranian moviemakers of the time. Their stated aim, formulated well before the religious reforms enforced by the Islamic Revolution, was to oppose sex and vulgarity in the movies, to encourage intellectual exchange and mutual support, and to make films embodying high moral values. Sadr, *Iranian Cinema,* 154.

22. Naficy, "Iranian Cinema," 156.

23. Catalogues searched include those of Kino, New Yorker Films, Swank, Janus Films, Kit Parker, Ivy Films, Budget Films, Films Incorporated, October Films, and many others.

24. Gerald Peary, "Gabbeh," *Film Reviews, Interviews, Essays, and Sundry Miscellany*, November 1999, online at http://www.geraldpeary.com/reviews/ghi/gabbeh.html.

25. By way of example, in 2000 New Yorker Films alone was distributing three of Makhmalbaf's films: *Gabbeh*; his earlier 1996 film *A Moment of Innocence*; and his 1998 feature *The Silence*. They had also acquired Jafar Panahi's 1997 *The Mirror,* and the 1998 debut film of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's seventeen-year-old daughter, *The Apple* (directed from her father's screenplay). The next year they added to their catalogue Majid Majidi's 1999 film *The Color of Paradise* and the 1999 award-winning production *The Wind Will Carry Us* by Abbas Kiarostami—who consistently tops critics' lists as one of the world's greatest living directors. By 2002, New Yorker also carried Kiarostami's *ABC Africa* (2001), Bahaman Farmanara's *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine* (2000), Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), as well as Hassan Yektapanah's *Djomeh* (2000) and Bahman Ghobadi's *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000)—dual winners of the *Camera D'Or* from Cannes in 2000. In order to appreciate the truly astonishing achievement that these numbers represent, one need only consider that New Yorker Films carried only one Egyptian film that same year—Shadi Abdelsalam's *Night of Counting the Years,* which was made in 1969 (the same year in which Iran's *The Cow* was produced) and which for years afterward was the only film from the entire Middle East in U.S. distribution. The Egyptian film industry hasn't managed to add another single film to New Yorker's catalogue over the same period of time in which Iran added eleven—all of them award-winning films.

26. Anjula Razdan, "The Iranian New Wave," *Utne Reader* 119 (September/October 2003): 28.

27. "Creativity is a necessity and limitation makes people more creative. I have a friend who is an architect. He tells me that he is at his best professionally when he designs structures for odd lots because these lands do not fit into the normal pattern and he has to work within a great deal of limitations. So, he must be creative and he enjoys this. It is these restrictions that provide an opportunity for people to be creative." Ali Akbar Mahdi, "In Dialogue with Kiarostami," *The Iranian*, August 25, 1998, online at http://www.iranian.com/Arts/Aug98/Kiarostami.