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"An Hungry Man Dreameth": Transcendental Film Theory and Stylistic Trends in Recent Institutional Films of the LDS Church

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ABSTRACT

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To the religiously minded, few things carry greater importance than a connection to the divine. For centuries, the literature of prophets and the work of gifted artists have served to create a liminal space where man and Maker can meet. The advent of cinema and the creation of the Internet pose unique questions for the artist seeking to lead an audience toward an encounter with God. In a modern world where discretionary time is dominated by on-demand video streaming, the value of understanding cinema and its myriad potential is particularly relevant.

As a religious organization, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has eagerly (and to a certain extent, uniquely) embraced and used film to further its aims. This thesis will further the conversation already begun on the topic of spirituality in official LDS Church productions, particularly adding new analysis regarding the form and content of more recent institutionally produced films. How do stylistic trends in recent official film productions of the LDS Church relate to the broader academic and theological discussion regarding cinematic spirituality?

After the introduction and thesis overview in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 will provide a survey of prominent works regarding cinematic spirituality. Theories that entertain how movies speak to human spirits are varied and highly subjective. Many theories about what makes a work "spiritual" grow from particular religious traditions and are informed by that theorist's beliefs about God's nature. Some theories are dependent on loosely measured criteria (editing pace, complexity of music, distance between camera and subject, etc.), while others rely almost entirely on the "feeling" a work conveys (which may or may not be determined by objectively measurable parts).

Chapter 3 relates the prominent theories laid out in Chapter 2 to the cinematic efforts made by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the past two decades. Examining the form and content of these media projects will reveal trends that indicate inherent assumptions on the part of the LDS Church's media department regarding the purpose and potential of spirituality and film. Chapter 4 explores how the Church's typical approach compares and contrasts with films made by independent Latter-day Saint filmmakers. Some stylistic possibilities will be derived from the efforts of Mormon artists more generally and may have implications for how Latter-day Saint films could help spiritually engage audiences.

Keywords: Mormon cinema, LDS Church media, Mormon Messages, I'm a Mormon, Mormon film, the Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos, The Testaments: Of One Fold and One Shepherd, Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration, Meet the Mormons, Spirituality and film, cinematic transcendence, Paul Schrader, Craig Detweiler, Dean Duncan

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Chapter I

Introduction and Overview

It shall even be as when an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty: or as when a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh; but he awaketh, and, behold, he is faint, and his soul hath appetite.

Isaiah 29:8

A small pod speeds through a tunnel of swirling color. Waves of bursting light soak the eyes while a cacophony assaults the ears. Little sense can be made of what is happening as reality flexes unexpectedly; familiar glimpses flash and pass almost nonsensically. Confusion and wonder battle for prominence: Where am I going? What is this supposed to mean? What will I find when I reach the end of the tunnel?

It was easy to forget that I was sitting in a theater with over a hundred other people watching light and shadow slide across a cinema screen; I was transported into the world of Robert Zemeckis's film *Contact* (1997).[1] At the time I failed to understand (and to an extent I still do) what I found so compelling about Ellie's journey from our pale blue dot to the distant star Vega. As much as the wonder of her journey itself, I believe I found resonance in her inexplicable experience and her following plea for faith when so little about her vision could be empirically established. Like Ellie searching for connection in the cosmos, cinemagoers are similar to Isaiah's hungry man dreaming, each looking for something to lastingly satisfy their hungry souls. The movie theater patron can relate with the Vegan that Ellie meets at the end of

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[1] *Contact*, directed by Robert Zemeckis (1997: Warner Brothers).

the tunnel of light when he states simply, "In all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable, is each other."

To the religiously minded, few things carry greater importance than a connection to the divine. For centuries, the literature of prophets and the work of gifted artists have served to create a liminal space where man and Maker can meet. As technology and art have advanced, new opportunities for communion have been unveiled. The advent of cinema and the creation of the Internet pose unique questions for the artist seeking to lead an audience toward an encounter with God. In a modern world where discretionary time is dominated by on-demand video streaming, the value of understanding cinema and its myriad potential is particularly relevant. Many people still seek spirituality, whether they interpret such as a relationship with a divine personality, a sense of place in the universe, or simply feeling interconnectedness with their fellow human beings.

Zemeckis's *Contact* may have been one of the first times I recall the sensation of being spiritually fed at the cinema. Having a spiritual epiphany during that film doesn't feel a stretch considering that *Contact* (based on Carl Sagan's book by the same name) is intended to have religious resonance. The story is deliberately constructed to mimic the narrative of the prototypical religious founding myth—Ellie playing the role of the new faith's founder. A miraculous and enigmatic message from the unknown beyond suggests unique and exhilarating possibilities. Because the intentions of the sender are new and unknown, those in authority debate whether or not to obey the message. A believer, however, feels certain, even desperate, to proceed with whatever the message requires. Driven by destiny, the believer moves forward; miracles occur—both wondrous and terrible, benevolent and violent. The believer, having faithfully heeded the message's call, is brought to the Sender only to be briefly satisfied and then

sent back as a prophet to witness of what was seen and heard before the incredulity of the on-looking crowd.

In element and structure, Ellie's story shares much in common with Moses, Mohammad, Joseph Smith, and many others who have donned the prophetic mantle to tell the world to follow the messages from Beyond. This placing of the prophetic call on Ellie's shoulders is especially intriguing due to Ellie's stated aversion to faith and spirituality throughout the film. After it is discovered that the message contained plans to construct a vehicle, an international selection committee is assembled to select a traveler for its first voyage. Ironically, Ellie is initially excluded as a candidate because of her disbelief that there is a God—an event shaped by the hubris and prejudice from each character involved. All—including Ellie—fail to recognize that Ellie too is moved by hope in what cannot be seen. In the end, however, after her miraculous journey to Vega and her confrontation with the sublime Other, Ellie is led to confess her faith and plead with the world to believe in the fact of her journey. The first to be moved by her call and, you could say, become her apostle is the priest, Palmer Joss (played by Matthew McConnaghey) as he asserts his belief in her story moments later. Though Palmer had initially been a member of the selection committee that had denied her, he, like Ellie, now recognizes her transformation by faith and revelation; he now sees they share many things in common, perhaps intended by Sagan (the story's creator) to symbolize a détente between religion and science, or at least a surrender of pride in an effort to see.[2] Both Palmer and Ellie have come to comprehend and appreciate the faith-filled reaching of the other.

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[2] There are, of course, other interpretations of this conclusion. For example, it could be said that Ellie's faith borne of science is the new religion to replace Palmer's Christianity—much how Christians view their religion to be the evolution of Judaism after Christ. Additionally, the film makes clear (and the book makes absolutely clear) that there *are* physical proofs connected to Ellie's journey, perhaps disrupting the parallel that her journey has to religious experience where the proofs are overwhelmingly subjective.

These structural and elemental points may be why the film spiritually resonates for many Western-educated people who feel so compelled by both the pull of faith and reason. *Contact* articulately depicts and explores an inherent tension. I certainly experienced this effect as a spiritually conscientious teenager. What may have been most impressive to me about *Contact* was recognizing that my journey was similar to Ellie's. Not in the sense that I was the founder of a new faith, or a prophet to a people, but in the fact that I had experienced my own set of inexplicable moments that made me a prophet unto myself—a founder to my personal faith. I felt connected to Ellie and her struggle. I appreciated what she had discovered and found. In me, it was a desire to know more about what is Beyond and have hope in things that may not be readily apparent. Film moved me to a new level of understanding about myself and my relationship with the universe that surrounded me.

Experiences like the one I described watching *Contact* have drawn many to explore the nature of cinematic transcendence. Understanding the interplay between the spiritual and the cinematic can further help religious institutions, their members, and even the casually spiritual make sense of their transcendental longings. As a religious organization intent on helping faith "increase in the earth" (D&C 1:21), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter referred to as "the LDS Church") has eagerly (and to a certain extent, uniquely) embraced and used film to further its aims. This thesis aims to contribute to the broader conversation about spirituality and moving images by exploring cinematic transcendence as it relates to the LDS Church: How do stylistic trends in recent official film productions of the LDS Church relate to the broader academic and theological discussion regarding cinematic spirituality? When moviegoers emerge from the dark of the theater, waking from their cinematic dream, will their

souls be fed or famished? What makes the difference? The path that will be taken in answering this question will be detailed in the following introduction.

Transcendent Cinema: Select Theories

What grants a film spiritual staying power? Is it simply the viewer's identification with a a certain set of mythological elements in a narrative as Joseph Campbell[3] famously explained and George Lucas famously demonstrated?[4] Is it the experiences that we bring with us to a particular narrative (like how I brought my own spiritual tensions to my viewing of *Contact*)? Both of these assertions are undeniably meaningful and there is a large body of writing to their credit, but these tend to demonstrate why art in general is spiritually evocative. What is it about film particularly that makes it a meaningful medium for connecting its viewer to the transcendent? John Lyden remarked that "it is only very recently that [theologians] have begun to seriously examine how the whole range of popular films function, religiously and culturally."[5] Understanding what we are doing to ourselves spiritually, mentally, socially, and emotionally by consuming moving images in large quantities is something of critical importance.[6]

It may be that the lush, sumptuous world of the cinema is antithetical to religious impulse and religious experience. Lyden articulates the indecision as to "whether this popular filmic religion should be accepted in tolerance or torn down like an idol."[7] Critics, scholars, and theologians reliably disagree on this point. After all, some scholars have suggested that Aaron's

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[3] See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008).

[4] See Dan Rubey, "Not So Long Ago nor Far Away: New Variations on Old Themes and Questioning *Star Wars'* Revival of Heroic Archetypes," in *Myth, Media, and Culture in Star Wars: An Anthology*, ed. Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 47–64.

[5] John Lyden, "To Commend or To Critique? The Question of Religion and Film Studies," *Journal of Religion and Film* 1 (1997): 6.

[6] See Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

[7] Lyden, 6.

golden calf which garnered so much holy ire may simply have been intended as "the pedestal or throne of [Israel's] invisible deity."[8] At what point, Paul Schrader asks, does a medium, such as film, get in the way of transcendence instead of being a catalyst for a divine encounter?[9] If film draws too much attention to itself, does it unintentionally become an idol to be worshipped and adorned in place of true divinity or spirituality?

Indeed, what could be termed spiritual cinema is a broad and varied category emerging from numerous approaches to spirituality, filmmaking, and film consumption. As used in this thesis, "spiritual cinema" or "transcendent cinema" refers to any film—part or whole—that directly contributes to a viewer's body of spiritual experience (whether intentional or unintentional on the part of the film's creator).[10] Briefly laying out the major theories and current school of thought regarding spirituality and film will be a critical starting point for advancing this thesis towards trends and assumptions in Mormon cinema. The salient authors on general cinematic spirituality referenced for this thesis include Marsh,[11] Ortiz,[12] Deacy,[13] Johnston,[14]

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[8] This would certainly explain Aaron's odd lack of punishment for his actions, when so many others were executed viciously at the hands of the Levites. Michael D. Coogan, ed., et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 128.

[9] Schrader felt the film should "deepen our attentiveness to a suggested depth of experience rather than distracting us by [spectacle]." Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1972), 164. See also Thomas J. Lefler and Gideon O. Burton, "Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic: Film Styles in Legacy," *BYU Studies*, 46:2 (2007): 292.

[10] The term "transcendence" or "transcendent" in reference to the attribute of spirituality in cinema is a practice popularized by Paul Schrader from his book *Transcendental Style* (see the previous footnote). In this thesis, the terms "transcendence" and "spirituality" are used interchangeably.

[11] See Clive Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[12] See Clive Marsh and Gaye Williams Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Oxford Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell), 1997.

[13] See Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Malden, Massachusetts Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

Detweiler,[15] Duncan,[16] and Schrader.[17] Schrader's published dissertation, *Transcendental Style,* is still relevant considering its lofty aims to establish a particular aesthetical method by which a film could lead a viewer to a direct confrontation with God. The shortcoming of Schrader's work, however, is that it may rely too heavily on its Calvinist roots, raising the question of whether it is as applicable to other spiritual traditions.[18] Ortiz, Johnston, Deacy, and Detweiler agree on taking a unifying approach between the world of cinema and the world of spirituality. Any story told sincerely, they wager, can help a viewer find a sort of "common grace"—a sense of unity between man, creation, and Maker. They posit that people will naturally be drawn to these films. Detweiler demonstrates this hypothesis by enumerating the spiritual characteristics of the top 100 films on IMDb. All of these scholars and the theories they discuss create an essential backdrop for understanding the Latter-day Saint cinematic tradition—if for no other reason than that the Mormon filmmaking movement emerges from that culture, borrowing the language, methods, and even assumptions of popular film.

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[14] See Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000) and Catherine M. Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston. *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 17.

[15] See Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2008).

[16] See Dean Duncan, "Film," in Daniel A. Stout, ed., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 144–152 and Dean Duncan, *Be Thou My Vision: Spirituality and the Moving Image* (unpublished draft manuscript, January 27, 2015).

[17] See Schrader.

[18] On the other hand, one of the prime examples Schrader uses for his theories are the films of Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu; films which certainly do not have Calvinist roots or origin. However, Schrader's *views* about what makes a film spiritual may rely heavily on his Calvinist upbringing, even though the films he may use to demonstrate his theories do not.

Mormon Cinema: Practices

Much can and has been written about spirituality and the cinema from a general perspective and from the angle of specific religious traditions.[19] Deciding to concentrate on the Mormon cinematic experience is due largely to the fact that I adhere to this particular religious tradition and also am an employee of the LDS Church, and therefore am well acquainted with its history, practices, curriculum, culture, and doctrine. My proximity makes it especially easy to observe the effects and viewer response to many of the LDS Church's media initiatives as I screen them in my classroom for the 180 high school aged seminary students I teach every semester. For the purposes of this thesis, the term "Mormon cinema" is intended to describe films either made by individuals who identify as Mormon, that are about overtly Mormon topics, or that are for Mormon audiences. This focus on Latter-day Saint cinema is not intended to suggest an exclusion of films from the broader, non-Mormon cinematic corpus. Rather, such films will occasionally be cited as examples of certain approaches to spiritual subject matter, provide cinematic or historical context, or inform the critique of more Mormon-centered cinema.

Randy Astle[20] concisely recounts the history of Mormon cinema from its early inception until the turn of the millennium. Though largely unconcerned with the spiritual ramifications of these films themselves, Astle's work is invaluable in terms of tracing the tradition of Mormon filmmaking back to the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, Thomas Lefler[21] and Dean

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[19] Dean Duncan notes, however, that religious film "does not, or at least does not yet, accurately reflect the range and diversity of the world's religious practice and possibility. . . . Many subjects that have been explored by filmmakers and by filmmaking communities await proper scholarly treatment" (Duncan, *Routledge*, 144). The discussion on religious film favors Western perspectives and tends towards the values of Judeo-Christian religion. Significant films have been made in the framework of other religious traditions, but critical analysis has yet to catch up with what has been produced. Of special interest on this topic could be a Shinto analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) or an Islamic perspective on films by Iranian directors Abbas Kiarostami (*Taste of Cherry* [1997]) or Majid Majidi (*Children of Heaven* [1999]). Clearly there is much work to be done.

[20] See Randy Astle and Gideon O. Burton, "A History of Mormon Cinema," *BYU Studies* 46:2 (2007), 144.

[21] See Lefler & Burton, 292.

Duncan[22] each provide thoughtful material in considering what may make a film spiritually fruitful from a Mormon perspective.

While some discussion about Mormon cinema more broadly will take place in the conclusion of this paper, the primary analytical focus will be on institutional (or official) films produced directly by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For Latter-day Saints, a conversation about spirituality and media is especially intriguing because the LDS Church eagerly and consistently utilizes cinema and its evolving forms to shore up members and proselytize potential converts. These official productions are especially worth examining with a critical eye because of the unique situation they enjoy, namely being free from typical market pressures and thus inhabiting a situation where they might more purely pursue spiritual applications without being ostracized or challenged. Thomas Lefler leverages Paul Schrader's theories to put one of the LDS Church's first major productions to the test and gains a surprising amount of traction despite the differences between Schrader's theological views and Latter-day Saint beliefs. Lefler provides clues regarding how some of these theological differences may manifest and how they may inform a Latter-day Saint cinematic aesthetic. These provide substantial points of departure and suggest plenty of room for additional study and critique regarding works created in the decades since they were written.

While Lefler and others will demonstrate that the conversation about Mormon spirituality in the cinema is well underway, this thesis intends to extend that conversation by adding new analysis pertaining to more recent film productions since the rise of Internet media to dominance in the past fifteen years. Some of the most significant institutionally produced productions since

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[22] See Gideon O. Burton, "A Manifesto for 'Fit for the Kingdom': Dean Duncan's Proposal for a Mormon Documentary Series," *BYU Studies* 46:2 (2007), 326.

the year 2000 include the international *I'm a Mormon* public relations campaign,[23] the

instructionally focused *Mormon Messages*,[24] the *Bible Videos* web series of scriptural

reenactments,[25] and the Church's most recent big budget theatrical films: *The Testaments: of*

One Fold and One Shepherd (2000),[26] *Joseph Smith: the Prophet of the Restoration* (2005),[27]

and the theatrically released documentary, *Meet the Mormons* (2014).[28]

    An exploration of the Church's recent online offerings is especially intriguing in

attempting to grasp the spirituality of Latter-day Saint institutional cinema. The *I'm a Mormon*

campaign features individual portraits of members of the LDS Church from around the globe.

Examples are as far ranging as professional rugby players from New Zealand,[29] French fashion

designers and philanthropists,[30] plane crash survivors,[31] and American rock stars.[32] Though each

of the lives featured in these short, upbeat documentaries appears rather different, their Mormon

identity provides a unifying characteristic.

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[23] *I'm a Mormon*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.mormon.org/people (accessed January 12, 2016).

[24] *Mormon Messages*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.mormonchannel.org/watch/series/mormon-messages (accessed January 12, 2016).

[25] *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. http://www.lds.org/bible-videos/ (accessed January 12, 2016).

[26] *The Testaments: Of One Fold and One Shepherd*, directed by Kieth Merrill (2000; Intellectual Reserve, 2006).

[27] *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*, directed by T. C. Christensen (2005; LDS Motion Picture Studio, 2010).

[28] *Meet the Mormons*, directed by Blair Treu (2015; Intellectual Reserve).

[29] See "Hi I'm William Hopoate," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.mormon.org/me/6tdh (accessed January 18, 2016).

[30] See "Hi I'm Cécile," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.mormon.org/me/bnsz (accessed January 18, 2016).

[31] See "My New Life," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.lds.org/pages/my-new-life?lang=eng (accessed January 18, 2016).

[32] See "Hi I'm Brandon," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.mormon.org/me/5233 (accessed January 18, 2016).

Other online offerings have been equally as telling in terms of the LDS Church's interest in using new media and the Internet. While the *I'm a Mormon* campaign was effective in helping change public perception about what Mormons are like, the *Mormon Messages* collection is designed to be an instructional aid for sharing and explaining LDS beliefs through social media or in seminary and Sunday school classes. These videos usually feature excerpts from sermons delivered as part of the Church's semiannual conferences. Mormons feel these sermons to be of profound importance, despite the fact that these sermons, when delivered live, may be lacking in visual flair. *Mormon Messages* seeks to alter some of this stylistic asceticism by combining carefully chosen excerpts from the conference addresses with illustrative video vignettes, reenactments, animation, music, or testimonials. Packaged as engaging miniature sermons generally two to five minutes in length, these are an effective and ideal source for many Mormons to express and anchor their beliefs. While the *I'm a Mormon* series brings a sense of profound connection between peoples, the *Mormon Messages* series makes for an intriguing subject of study due to its catechistic nature. For *Mormon Messages*, the content, rather than the style, becomes the aim for spirituality.

The Church's most recent addition to its online pantheon of shareable videos is the scripturally focused *Bible Videos* series. The videos feature nothing that is overtly Mormon, and could be categorized as almost ecumenical. They adhere closely to the widely accepted King James translation of the New Testament and omit many of Joseph Smith's retranslations that Latter-day Saints prize.[33] Unlike the *I'm a Mormon* campaign and the *Mormon Messages* collection, the *Bible Videos* series is important because of its stylistic experiments. While the

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[33] Latter-day Saint editions of the King James Version of the Bible include footnotes that include the salient details from Smith's alterations. Leaving these translations out in the *Bible Videos* shows considerable restraint and bespeaks an earnest effort to make something that would be valuable to any Christian denomination.

former two web series utilize everything available in the cinematic arsenal to create engaging films, *Bible Videos* aims for and achieves a more reserved tone. Though some of that audiovisual meekness has been reversed to some extent, the short vignettes clearly demonstrate an evolution within the aesthetic of Latter-day Saint institutional films.

Perhaps uniquely, the Church also uses movies as a part of sacraments performed within Mormon temples as a replacement for what would have traditionally been theatrical reenactments.[34] This utilization of film most clearly demonstrates the LDS Church's embrace of cinema as a spiritually viable form of art. Initially, these films were Spartan in nature and mirrored early attempts at creating cinematic dramas, that is, simply filming a typical theater reenactment (proscenium and all). Much like cinema itself, these films have gradually grown more complex to the point where they now feature elaborate costuming, ornate sets, computer generated special effects, sweeping musical scores, and emotive performances. This implementation of film in a sacramental setting makes concerted effort to understand the spiritual benefits or limitations of cinematic art a significant consideration for Mormons.

Overall, I expect to discover through this analysis that the majority of films produced by the LDS Church draw heavily from the commercial Hollywood studio tradition to craft emotional, missionary-minded films. Though these films often seem to have their desired effect, their methods seem at once both typical and antithetical to what Mormon tradition suggests creates and cultivates lasting spiritual experiences. Typical in the sense of firesides and youth camps, but antithetical in the sense of the "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12) or becoming "agents unto themselves" (Moses 6:56). Though the sweeping Hollywood style appears to be irresistible for institutional Mormon cinema, some independent Latter-day Saint filmmakers and

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[34] David John Buerger, "The Development of the Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony," in *Dialogue* 20 (1987): 60–61.

other Mormon artists have fruitfully experimented with different styles and methods to assist in spiritual transcendence. A sampling of the work of these artists will be briefly discussed at the conclusion of this thesis, followed by an exploration of several possibilities for the future of Mormon cinema.

Chapter II

Approaches to Spirituality in the Movies

Film historian Robert Birchard describes the following experience from his youth: "Working in a theater where a reissue of DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* was playing, I couldn't help feeling that the film was a work of incredible banality—and yet I'd see looks of religious rapture on the faces of patrons leaving the screenings. These people were either crazy, or there was something to this 1956 relic that I was missing."[35] I have had moments like this one described by Birchard—both where I have been puzzled by the euphoria of those around me and also where others have been perplexed by the ecstasy I express regarding a film's sentiment. Navigating to any film review aggregation site such as Rotten Tomatoes or Meta Critic will instantly demonstrate that movies generally move each person in a different way. Films that have been evocative and visionary in a religious sense for me such as *Speed Racer* (2008)[36] and *About Time* (2013)[37] were almost universally panned by critics, which begs questions about why we react differently to the films we watch. Not all can or will agree on what makes a film meaningful, to say nothing of what makes a film revelatory.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the scope of recent thought about the intersection of spirituality and cinema. While the inclusion of some historical details is required for an understanding of theory and style, what is presented here will focus primarily on the implications of a handful of recent theories for comprehending spirituality in the movie theater

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[35] Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 2004), ix–xiii.

[36] *Speed Racer*, directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski (2008; Warner Brothers).

[37] *About Time*, directed by Richard Curtis (2013; Translux, Working Title Films).

and less on the history of religious films.[38] The views of David Jasper, Clive Marsh, Christopher Deacy, Gaye Ortiz, Catherine Barsotti, Robert Johnston, Craig Detweiler, Dean Duncan, and Paul Schrader will especially be explored in an effort to posit answers to critical questions regarding the nature of film and its potential to play a meaningful role in modern dialogue regarding spirituality. What importance does cinema hold in a conversation about spirituality and culture? Can cinema, as a new and mass market art form, perform the same well-established revelatory roles played by literature, paint, or sculpture? What do we do with the potentially objectionable or seemingly anti-spiritual content present in many popular films? What is the general feeling about what makes spiritual film evocative and what are the auspices under which it functions? Following this groundwork, the critical question of how each of these facets of film theory apply to Mormonism and the cinematic efforts that Latter-day Saints have made will be considered.

Culture Means Movies

Naturally, the charge to define what religious experience means is challenging; the nuances and variations inherent to spirituality make dissecting what spirituality means to individuals and groups a daunting task. The religious quest is simultaneously regarded as a fundamental "probing of the human identity,"[39] "an extraordinary sense of reality,"[40] "a perspective and a salve" with "which one can deal with the basic issues of the self," the "public imagination,"[41] and "a frame" for understanding life and existence.[42] Alternatively, Jesus stated,

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[38] For an excellent synthesis of the history and developments of religious film, see Duncan, *Routledge*.

[39] Thomas Martin, *Image and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film* (London: Associated University Presses, 1991), preface

[40] Martin, 27.

[41] Martin, 151.

"This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Knowing God and experiencing the raw power of Divinity lie at the center of religious intent, leaving the spiritual seeker awakened to a new sense of identity and purpose.[43] The study of processes that lead a person to "knowing God" and thus satisfying the drive for existential meaning will be termed (for the purposes of this paper), theology.[44] Religion, then, could be expressed as the systematized quest to make contact with the divine and receive the attendant benefits; theology is the effort to understand that spiritual process.

Theology is frequently transmitted in religious communities through myths or paradigmatic stories.[45] These stories—frequently provided by religious tradition—help us make sense of the world and each person's place in it. As Robert Benne notes, some of the great benefits of religious narratives are that "they help people *interpret* what is happening to them and their compatriots, they *relate* persons that receive them to larger realities beyond themselves, and they provide a *model* for the way they should act."[46] This is accurate for Christianity at large, notes Benne, which "has a specific vision about what the human predicament is, how it is faced and remedied, and what life on earth ought to be like. This vision is recorded in the biblical narratives that have so powerfully conditioned life in the Western world."[47]

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[42] Myerhoff in S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Wallflower, 2008), vii.

[43] Though the reference used here is specifically Christian (coming from the New Testament), the same could be said for other religious traditions, such as Hinduism's aim to reunite individual souls with Brahman-Atman—the "World Soul."

[44] Existential questions such as, "What is the purpose of life?" Or, "What is my place in the cosmos?" See Johnston, 14 and 16.

[45] Robert Benne, *Seeing Is Believing: Visions of Life Through Film* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1998), 11.

[46] Benne, 11, emphasis added.

[47] Benne, 11.

The truth of Benne's claim that religious narratives are intended to orient daily life is easily demonstrated by the short yet shocking tale of Lot's rape by his daughters in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The episode (which serves as a conclusion to the Lot narrative) may feel like a non sequitur to the modern reader; however, it would have been remarkably relevant to Israelites anciently living in Transjordan. The biblical text reads, "Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father. And the firstborn bare a son, and called his name Moab: the same is the father of the Moabites unto this day. And the younger, she also bare a son, and called his name Ben-ammi: the same is the father of the children of Ammon unto this day" (Genesis 19:36–38). Israelites living in the time specified by the biblical author as "this day" gain information about their Transjordan neighbors and rivals, the Moabites and the Ammonites—neither of which are ever presented by biblical authors in favorable light.[48] Thus the mythic tale of the unscrupulous union between Lot and his daughters following Sodom's destruction was used by early Israelites to rationalize their negative disposition towards these neighboring countries—demonstrating Benne's suggestion that religious myth serves as both an explanation and a guide for cultural practice. Like a compass and a map, the stories religious individuals tell about God and themselves orient their position as part of a bigger, grander community—it informs and unifies their cultural expectations and experience and gives reason to their systematized living.

The effect of religious narrative tradition is interesting when examining culture in a modern setting—film being the most preferred and prominent expression of cultural consciousness in the modern, Western world. Attests Thomas Martin, "Because the religious quest is a probing of the human identity at such a basic level, it will permeate all of the

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[48] With a few exceptions—the laudatory account of the Moabite Ruth's actions and character. See Coogan, 38.

articulations of human culture including film."[49] Since the advent of cinema just over a century ago, film has taken modern culture by storm. And, like other art forms, cultural issues (difficult to disentangle from religious issues) debated in larger society found address on film.[50] Mere decades later and cinema's audience was unequaled by other arts. Indeed, "few art forms have the attention and power that films have in the public forum."[51] In many ways, the ubiquity of film has allowed it to become a near perfect reflecting board for popular culture, allowing the attentive individual to discern a culture's complicated concepts about God, self, and human interconnectedness through its medium. In many ways, the common body of knowledge used by previous generations—Shakespeare, the Bible, the classics—have been replaced by cinema. Rather than speaking of Homer's *Odyssey* or Dante's *Inferno*, the average educated person would speak in terms of Frank Darabont's *Shawshank Redemption* (1994)[52] or Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump* (1994).[53]

Filmic works have become a point of convergence for regional, national, and international cultures—crossing boundaries and reaching demographics impossible or impractical to the classics of yesteryear. The reach and staying power of film is difficult to discredit! As a Mormon missionary in South Africa, I was able to witness this phenomenon first hand. There were many areas where my culture and that of my African associates (many of whom came from various southern African nations) did *not* converge, but we had seen many of

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[49] Martin, preface.

[50] Paul V. M. Flesher, *Film & Religion: An Introduction* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2007), xi.

[51] Martin, 152.

[52] *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont (1994; Castle Rock Entertainment).

[53] *Forrest Gump*, directed by Robert Zemeckis (1994; Paramount Pictures). This is not to imply that the Bible, Homer, or Dante are of little worth—quite the contrary! This is only to suggest that in modern culture, people are better equipped with film references when making sense of their lived experiences than they are with many of these classic works of literature.

the same movies and were able to quote *Star Wars*[54] ("Do, or do not, there is no try.") or

Remember the Titans[55] to make a point or communicate an ideal. Besides cinema, the only other

cultural overlap we shared by default was our faith—and even that at times seemed to present

less in common than our mastery of movie theater narratives.[56]

The importance of placing theology in a cultural context thus implies—for the modern

theologian—the importance of placing theology in a context of cinema because of its primacy in

modern culture. Film is a "necessary and vital element" in the conversation between theology

and culture.[57] Modernity's marriage to the movie theater means that we should not be surprised

to have cinema inevitably play a part in any conversation on contemporary understanding about

God and life.

Full Coffers, Empty Souls?

Like religion and the narratives it presents, "great works of art," notes Benne,

"communicate deeply-held convictions about the nature of human existence."[58] Though many

find this concept applicable to art generally, not all are willing to swallow this proposition as it

relates to film. This is not because they doubt the aforementioned universal impact of the film

medium, but because of critical "ontological differences" inherent to film as an art that render it

unfit for participation in the religious spectrum. Film, to some theologians like David Jasper, is

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[54] *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*, directed by Irvin Kershner (1980; Lucasfilm).

[55] *Remember the Titans*, directed by Boaz Yakin (2000; Jerry Bruckheimer Films).

[56] This, largely because many African missionaries were converts to Mormonism of only a few years and not lifelong members like many of the American missionaries were, but also because the African experience would naturally emphasize different doctrinal points than would the American experience.

[57] Deacy & Ortiz, viii.

[58] Benne, 9.

regarded as a "commercial medium that revolves around money and profit," whereas theological reflection is "two-edged, ironic, difficult, and ambiguous."[59]

Jasper's concerns are understandable. Rather than being the earnest, honest expression of a single artist's belief or piety, film is cumbered by the perspectives of numerous participants, possibly adulterating the pure intent of inspired artists and transforming the result into a cultural echo chamber instead of a prophetic vision. Furthermore, movies are by nature large—and therefore expensive—undertakings. As zeros append to cost estimates, purity of artistic expression or cultural innovation often take a back seat to concerns about investment and return. Studios, the entities possessing the economic power to perpetuate cinematic art, are undoubtedly money-conscious and, by necessity, viewer-conscious. Money can only be made on motion pictures that viewers want to see and *big* money can only be made on films that appeal to everyone. Thus, a lowest-common-denominator approach to cinematic art often emerges from a Hollywood that has little interest in doing the "two-edged, ironic, difficult, and ambiguous" task of theology and spirituality. Rather than spur religious inquiry and understanding, Jasper feels that cinema "is [only] there to help us through the tedium of inactivity and is supremely an art of illusion, [not spiritual reality]." The best it can do is emulate or "mimic" Divinity "through the discernment . . . of Christ-figure motifs."[60] Hollywood's constant association, in Jasper's view, with opulent, money-driven spectacles belies ambitions that cannot meld with a discussion on theological inquiry. To paraphrase using scriptural language, Jasper regards the state of the Hollywood system and concludes, "a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matthew 7:18).

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[59] As cited in Deacy & Ortiz, 202.

[60] Ibid.

Perhaps what Jasper imagined (and was describing) as the best cinema can do were the

works of Cecil B. DeMille and those that have been inspired by his achievements. In DeMille's

entire body of work, his "religious epics"—such as his 1956 masterwork, *The Ten*

Commandments[61]—were by far the most impressive and presented the most enduring impact.[62]

In these cinematic behemoths, DeMille employed nearly anything that would draw in viewers to

fuel box office receipts and drive home his message. To effect this spectacle, DeMille expended

copious budgets to hire casts of thousands, depict salacious pagan revels, feature barely clad

women,[63] construct enormous sets, create ornate costumes, wield the full force of technological

sophistication for special effects, and score his works with booming soundtracks. DeMille's

films are the cinematic equivalent of what the military would refer to as a shock-and-awe

campaign. Critics groaned, but audiences flooded in by the millions.[64] Emboldened by the box

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[61] *The Ten Commandments*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1956; Motion Picture Associates).

[62] Kevin Thomas said of *The Ten Commandments* (1956), "It is the epitome of the biblical spectacles for which DeMille was so famous" (Birchard, ix–x). Dean Duncan explains the contrasts of religious epics of the 1920s and 1930s (before the prevalence of sound) and the religious films of the 1950s and 1960s. "Hollywood religious films before sound reveal more substance, more delicacy, and even more depth of feeling, than they are now given credit for," notes Duncan. An excellent contrast between these two eras is DeMille's earlier, silent iteration of *The Ten Commandments* and the 1956 remake. Duncan writes that the latter films, "generally lacked the subtlety and sincerity of the best of their 1920s predecessors. Part of this is due to their broad dramatic devices and their sometimes aggressive simplemindedness, all insufficiently balanced by impression of actual belief" (Duncan, *Routledge*, 146 and 149).

[63] DeMille seemed to love "preaching virtue, while giving audiences a good long look at the wickedness of vice" (Philip Kemp, "Cecil B. DeMille," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 34).

[64] Kevin Thomas, in the introduction to Birchard's biography of DeMille, provides an example from one contemporary reviewer of DeMille's 1956 production of *The Ten Commandments*: "While DeMille has broken new ground in terms of size, he has remained conventional with the motion picture as an art form. Emphasis on physical dimension has rendered neither awesome nor profound the story of Moses. The eyes of the onlooker are filled with spectacle" (Birchard, x).

office, DeMille ignored his detractors and pressed forward. He had the world's attention, which,

it seems, to DeMille was victory.[65]

The spectacle of DeMille's films—pagan, technological, sexual, or otherwise—was

always followed by his intended message: "a last-reel affirmation of traditional morality."[66] The

paradoxical juxtaposition of titillation and piety did not go unnoticed. In response to objections

concerning his abundant use of sexual imagery, DeMille replied that he was "a firm believer in

showing sin in action in order to effectively condemn it." For him, the moral end could justify

the risqué means.[67] As Dean Duncan explains, these sexual elements in an otherwise "religious"

film may actually reflect spiritual realities rather than frustrate them: "The combination of

homily and sensuality, on the one hand hypocritical, is also a poignant reflection of the struggles

and failings of any person, any community, and certainly any industry aspiring toward

transcendence in a secular world and in a modern and materialistic age."[68] One other thing that

was certainly to DeMille's credit was his guilelessness—his morality and his didacticism were

not adopted in an effort to please the crowds, even if his use of sexuality seemed to be.[69] DeMille

saw himself in something of a missionary role, garnering interest for biblical topics in a world

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[65] It would seem, at least in Charles Higham's view, that DeMille had abandoned "the artistic aspirations which had driven him as a young man. He would simply set out to be a supremely successful filmmaker" (Quoted in Kemp, 34).

[66] Birchard, ix.

[67] Birchard, ix. In addition, Charles Higham observes that even films directed by DeMille that were on more "pagan" subjects "were morality tales, in disguised form reworkings of the moral fairytales which he had learned at the knee of his father, the lay minister and playwright Henry DeMille" (Charles Higham, *Cecil B. DeMille* [New York: The Da Capo Press, 1973], x).

[68] Duncan, *Routledge*, 146.

[69] Thomas notes, "It was [DeMille's] natural flair for screen storytelling and his patent sincerity that make his films so endearingly entertaining and their messages, in some instances, valid even still." He also notes that "it is important to see [DeMille's] work and those of his contemporaries . . . as expressions of a Victorian sensibility committed to uplift as much as entertain" (Birchard, x).

growing disinterested with scripture.[70] He clearly outlined what he saw as his Christian and

millennial duty as a filmmaker: "We in the industry hold great power. Who else—except the

missionaries of God—has had our opportunity to make the brotherhood of man not a phrase, but

a reality—a brotherhood that has shared the same tears, dreamt the same dreams, been

encouraged by the same hopes, inspired by the faith in man and God, which we painted for them,

night after night, on the screens of the world? Our influence must be used for good—for truth,

for beauty, and for freedom."[71] DeMille saw himself as a proselytizer in the truest sense, and he

saw his films as propaganda in a grand effort to convert the world.

Paul Schrader, a filmmaker and theorist with an eye towards intentionally "spiritual"

works, notes a typical example of DeMille's modus operandi from *The Ten Commandments*

(1956): "In the title scene Moses is on Mount Sinai and God is off-screen to the right. After some

premonitory thundering, God literally pitches the commandments, one by one, onto the screen

and the awaiting blank tablets. The commandments first appear as small whirling fireballs

accompanied by the sound of rushing wind, and then quickly—building in size all the while—zip

across the screen and collide with the blank tablets. Puff! The smoke clears, and the tablet is

clearly inscribed."[72] In DeMille's missionary logic, there could be little question for viewers

regarding the origins of the Ten Commandments—the audience had just seen them appear on

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[70] Charles Higham notes that DeMille sought to make "the scriptures attractive and fascinating to the masses in an age of increasing materialism and hedonism. A deeply committed Episcopalian, he literally accepted every word of the Bible without question, and went on record as saying that every word of it with the exception of the Book of Numbers could be filmed exactly as it stood" (Higham, x). DeMille distributed copies of the Bible to every member of the cast and crew of *The Ten Commandments*, inviting them to study the book of Exodus. Furthermore, he hired teams of historians to hunt down the facts available about Moses and required his screenwriters to adhere to those facts strictly while still allowing ample room for enlivening interpolations. Additionally, notes Higham, "DeMille instructed the cameraman Peverell Marley to study hundreds of biblical paintings, examining precisely with what effects of light the old masters achieved their work. Two hundred and ninety-eight paintings were fully reproduced in the film" (Higham,161).

[71] Birchard, 364.

[72] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1972), 163.

tablets of stone as they were spoken by the voice of God himself. Using sophisticated special effects, DeMille sought to lend a sense of reality to spiritual mythology by depicting the miraculous as it "really" might have occurred.[73] What a viewer sees on film appears "real;" therefore, if the works of God are depicted on film they too are conceivably "real."[74] The filmgoer's temporary suspension of disbelief, DeMille may have hoped, would carry beyond the closing credits, quieting doubts and engendering faith. Through the miracle of cinema, entire theaters are able to witness the miracles of Moses and Jesus and become more ardent believers; or, if an unbeliever, to behold the inexplicable and be convinced of the awesome reality of the divine. While it is difficult to know if Jasper, like DeMille, would view DeMille's creations as a net positive, they do seem to demonstrate exactly what he found objectionable—a preoccupation with spectacle and bottom-line returns. Certainly to DeMille's credit, however, is his apparently righteous intentions and his encouraging depictions of religious mythology on screen. In Jasper's view, while this is not perfect, it may be the best cinema can do, being spiritually hobbled by nature.

Concerns about the corruption of capital are not unwarranted. The "mammon" of the box office is wound tightly with the work of cinema, and flashing lights and grotesque spectacle have a tendency to catch the eye and sell more tickets. This reality begs the fair question as to whether a work of crass showmanship has any useful place in a discussion of who God is and how we

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[73] Jeffrey Pence notes that DeMille was in favor of using "the moviemaker's full arsenal of visual, aural, and narrative techniques into the service of evoking the miraculous" (Jeffrey Pence, "Cinema of the Sublime," *Poetics Today* 25:1 [2004]: 47).

[74] Paul Schrader notes, that film is "An ideal medium for making fantasy seem real. . . . The course of action for the religious propagandist was clear: he would 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" (Schrader, 163).

know him.[75] Indeed, some theologians and filmmakers, such as Paul Schrader, have agreed with Jasper (at least in this one regard)—that the sensuous nature of the film image renders the fallen world so bewitchingly alluring that it will ultimately serve as a distraction to human spirituality, rather than an aide to it.[76]

Immanuel: Common Grace and General Revelation

Noting the discontent with cinema on the part of some theologians seems ironic in that Jesus himself was criticized during his life for dining with money-soiled publicans (Mark 2:16) and unflinchingly receiving honor at the hand of sexually tainted sinners (Luke 7:44–50). On the other hand, Jesus did not redirect or modify his teachings for profit; nor did he encourage sexual rapacity to draw an audience—things of which popular commercial cinema has rightly been accused. But it is that miraculous condescension—being born as an infant among crass humans in an effort to save them from their soiled nature—that is the very miracle that Christian theology attempts to address.[77] In the first chapter of the New Testament, Jesus' arrival is announced by an angel, declaring, "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." (Matthew 1:23). The alternate spelling of Jesus' title Immanuel lends origin and meaning to the word *immanence*, or the impression of God's condescension and presence with humankind. In art and philosophy, immanence has come to represent and express the miracle of the divine intermingled with the quotidian, profane everyday.

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[75] See Schrader.

[76] Ibid.

[77] The concept of divine condescension is present in many religious traditions, such as that of the god of Krishna in Hinduism, though Christian myth is used to demonstrate the example here.

Limiting religiosity in cinema to those moments when religion is happening on screen would be fallacious, to be sure, because the nature of immanent spirituality interweaves itself so thoroughly into the day-to-day moments of a person's life. Thus, by watching a film about a character's life (whether documentary or fictional), a viewer would automatically receive a presentation on that individual's theology to a certain extent. Catherine Barsotti and Robert Johnston observe that, "it is not just, or even primarily, the stories of angels and demons that are rightly labeled 'spiritual.'"[78]

Barsotti and Johnston hope to quell the notion that cinema's visual appeal makes it antithetical to spirituality, championing the value of divine cinematic immanence. Writing to young theologians, they propose what may be the bridging of the gap:

> We have written this book in the hope that our enthusiasm will increase your enthusiasm, initially for film but ultimately for God. Typically, many in the church have bracketed God out of Hollywood's secular entertainment. Isn't it just a mindless escape, at times even faith denying? An understanding of common grace, of the wider work of God's Spirit throughout and within all creatures and creation, would suggest that this is not the case. God is, after all, in the midst of life—all of it. This includes the movies. We hope this book will strengthen your "reel faith." . . . God is present in the movies for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.[79]

Similar to the parables of Jesus, Barsotti and Johnston suggest that spiritually relevant messages are available for the attentive and earnest viewer—even in Hollywood's blockbuster films. Craig Detweiler concurs:

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[78] Catherine M. Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston. *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 17. Detweiler states, "The same God who spoke through dreams and visions in the Bible is still communicating through our celluloid dreams—the movies. As the Spirit of God raised up unexpected sources of wisdom during biblical times, so the same creative Spirit is inspiring actors, screenwriters, and directors today. The relative faith or righteousness of the artists has no bearing on their ability to become a conduit for revelatory insights. God is not only speaking through faith-fueled projects like *The Passion of the Christ* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*" (Detweiler, 29).

[79] Barsotti & Johnston, 11–12.

Despite the entertainment industry's efforts to reduce filmmaking to formula, the restless longings of artists and audiences still gravitate toward creative ways to explore ultimate questions. The finest films chronicle our search for love, our longing for home, our hunger for community. Enduring classics wrestle with why we hide from one another, undermining the community we seek. The most inspiring movies suggest that we can overcome our worst tendencies and engage in heroic efforts via courage, humility, beauty, and honor. But nobody knows why certain films capture the hearts and minds of audiences with such unpredictable (and often unrepeatable) power. It remains an elusive, ineffable mystery—an art rooted in faith and struggle.[80]

Rather than being few and far between, Detweiler, Barsotti, and Johnston feel spiritual messages are frequently present on the movie screens of the world and engage viewers in spiritual activity. To explain how this is possible, Barsotti and Johnston appeal to incarnational theology—the notion that the invisible spirit realm is not glimpsed through literal depictions, "but indirectly, through observing its effect in the lives of others and ourselves. An honest depiction of a creature can reveal the Creator. A truthful telling of the human drama can voice the divine as well."[81] Dean Duncan's thoughts resonate with this sentiment: "Regardless of method or motivation, these films, and those responsible for their production, have pursued and attained an exalted, exalting ideal: beauty, sacredness, love. For all of its calculation, conflict, and crassness, film has repeatedly, insistently scaled these heights. For all its profanity, this is a medium marked by mystery, even grace."[82]

This honest telling of life as it stands—fallen though it may be—thus reveals a glimpse of divinity and allow humans to ascend to greater levels of spirituality. The "honest depiction" of a fellow human or the "truthful telling" of mortal nature on film opens the eyes of the viewer to a sense of companionship with the human race—what Barsotti and Johnston call "common

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[80] Detweiler, 28.

[81] Barsotti & Johnston, 18.

[82] Duncan, *Be Thou My Vision*, mss.

grace."[83] Humankind more clearly sees its relationship to humanity and the natural world that

comes from being cohabitants on God's footstool. Martin echoes an emphasis on this type of

spiritually enlivening viewership, "The religious consciousness signifies an extraordinary sense

of reality that apprehends the interrelatedness and perhaps the oneness of a creation that appears

on first encounter to be multifaceted and separate. The religious consciousness must therefore

thrust beyond the immediate sense of reality to an interpretive one."[84] Here, Martin, Barsotti, and

Johnston seem to be in complete agreement that cinema can awaken awareness of "common

grace beyond the immediate sense of reality," leaving considerable room to acknowledge the

spiritual potential of more films while laying aside the manhunt for Messiah motifs.

Detweiler expresses a similar ideal for film viewing, borrowing the theological term

"general revelation" to describe a similar phenomenon as Johnston's "common grace":

> General revelation is a term created by theologians to describe the experience of
> God available to all people. Such revelations may arrive as a word, a thought, a
> vision, a touch, or a feeling. These divine breakthroughs wake us up, surprise us,
> reassure us that we are not alone. They may also put us in our place, reminding us
> how small or self-imposed our problems may be amid hurting humanity. In a
> contentious world, the revelations of the Spirit move us toward peace, patience,
> and compassion. . . . The power of general revelation often resides in God's
> ability to sneak up on us, to speak through unlikely people or unexpected
> situations (even horror movies).[85]

The power of this perspective is its universality—both in how it is communicated and

how it is received. It dissolves boundaries of culture, language, and faith and allows for a

compelling sense of unification and understanding. Detweiler provides an interesting example in

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[83] Barsotti & Johnston, 18.

[84] Martin, 34.

[85] Detweiler, 33. Duncan elaborates on Detweiler's statement regarding horror movies: "The modern horror film emerges with intermittent effectiveness as a kind of negative image of conventional religious questioning, with its deep anxieties and pessimism attending and invigorating discussions of the usual issues" (Duncan, *Routledge*, 150).

author Philip Pullman, creator of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy.[86] When the first book of the trilogy—*The Golden Compass*[87]—was adapted for film, Pullman's work received no shortage of attention, being described as anti-religious and even an atheist rendering of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.[88] While the books do criticize the authority of corrupt religious systems, raise questions about the identity and supremacy of God (or, at least, the God of Pullman's books), and doubt the notion of life after death, the suggestion that they are anti-religious or irreverent feels a superficial claim. Rather, the deeper current of the book seems to beg for heightened spirituality: more guileless reaching for truth; more righteousness beyond dogma; more fervent belief in a benevolent, unifying force connecting all living beings. Thus, rather than seeking to put a nail in the coffin of youthful spirituality, Pullman's work aims to stoke the fires of a faith that is purified by dogged righteousness and earnest, unquenchable inquiry.[89] Noting this, Detweiler encourages his readers to "remember the insight of Joseph in Genesis 50:20: 'as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.'" Detweiler then asks, "Why are we still animated by so much fear instead of being animated by faith?"[90] The implication being that God can teach us from even the most unlikely sources, animating initial darkness with subsequent spiritual light.

Dean Duncan acknowledges Jasper's genuine concerns about the potentially objectionable content of popular cinema, but feels that his conclusions about spirituality at the movie theater are ultimately incorrect. "The religious film is built on an almost impossible paradox," notes Duncan, "It seeks the sacred in secular and commercial settings. The paradox is

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[86] *His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman (New York: Everyman's Library), 2011.

[87] *The Golden Compass*, directed by Chris Weitz (2007; New Line Cinema).

[88] C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins), 1982.

[89] Though, to be fair, this inquiry is largely conducted on an individual level, suggesting that Pullman champions personal spiritual inquiry and truth-seeking, but has little love for organized religion.

[90] Detweiler, 259.

that, although one cannot serve God and Mammon, and Jesus cleared the moneychangers in the temple, the religious film has very often been spiritually substantial, for all the crass materialism of the medium."[91] Duncan notes elsewhere, "Even Hollywood's hedonism, its materialism and its movie stars answered a yearning and inspired a kind of devotion."[92] Other scholars of religion and film appear to agree with Duncan's paradox. "The most important spiritual truths are often embedded within seemingly debased settings or sources," remarks Craig Detweiler.[93] Like the biblical example of Gomer's whoredoms, Detweiler concludes that divine encounters are full of irony and surprise. "When horror-meister Stephen King serves as the source of inspiring films like *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*,[94] we must question our assumptions about who God chooses and how the Spirit moves."[95]

This embrace of the unexpected people and places God may use to speak to us is not to suggest that viewers should simply ignore potentially damaging or questionable premises within the films they watch. Nor does it imply that if viewers find themselves offended then they simply aren't trying hard enough to be spiritually enlightened. Duncan observes that such substantial and sin-ridden films "could make little connection with many of the believing members of an alienated audience." This is not to suggest that objecting to film content or ideology is prudish.

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[91] Duncan, *Be Thou My Vision*, mss.

[92] Duncan, *Routledge*, 147

[93] Detweiler, 29.

[94] *The Green Mile*, directed by Frank Darabont (1999; Castle Rock Entertainment).

[95] Detweiler, 29. He also notes on the same page, "Entire sections of the biblical Proverbs were culled from sayings outside Israel. The wisdom of Agur in Proverbs 30 and King Lemuel in Proverbs 31 were lifted from Egyptian texts. The prophet Hosea was challenged to love a faithless wife, Gomer. How can a story rooted in whoring about serve divine purposes? Hosea's strained marriage was turned into a living illustration of God's faithfulness across time. To Habukkuk's cry for justice, God raised up the bitter and ruthless Chaldeans. How can God use such godless people to inaugurate divine judgment? The Oscar-winning movie Amadeus also questions the wisdom of God. It is easy to understand why Salieri raged against a God who distributes such talent and blessing to seemingly unworthy servants like Mozart."

Rather, using Schrader and Scorcese's *The Last Tempataion of Christ* (1987)[96] as an example,

Duncan carefully mediates between the competing claims of engagement and propriety:

> It [*The Last Temptation of Christ*] is a brave film, full of deep conviction, as well as significant lapses in decorum and taste. The hostility with which it was met may in part have reflected the high-handed philistinism of which the religious right is capable, but it also raised real and legitimate issues. This was not just conservatism, but conservation, not just intolerance, but an awareness of the potential dangers of its opposite. Faithful factions would have it that the over-inclination to take offense has to be factored against an opposite danger, which is the inability to be offended. . . . Artistry and individual expression are essential, and need to be subordinated to a sense of social responsibility and the pursuit of the public good.[97]

Duncan further notes that, "some of the most sincere of film sermons espouse

contradictory and even dubious precepts."[98] John Lyden suggests that like their creators, films

are often a mixed bag: "any film can convey valid messages even while it contributes to [fallen,

mortal] ideology."[99] Martin Luther referred to this phenomenon in people as *simul justus et*

peccator, at once both righteous (*justus*) and sinful (*peccator*). "Popular films may act as

windows to transcendence . . . as they open us to new visions or reassert what is valid in old

ones—[but] films may also support class, race, and gender structures which deserve

deconstruction."[100] Duncan summarily agrees with Lyden's take: "The contradictions need

exposure at the same time that the sincerity deserves respect, and sympathetic study."[101] That

said, Craig Detweiler additionally provokes his readers to subject their sensitivities to

introspection and action. He notes, "All forms of Revelation are elusive and exceptional. We

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[96] *The Last Temptation of Christ*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1988; Universal Pictures).

[97] Duncan, *Routledge*, 151.

[98] Duncan, *Be Thou My Vision*, mss.

[99] Lyden, 29.

[100] Lyden, 28.

[101] Duncan, *Be Thou My Vision*, mss.

never know how or when the Spirit will move (or how blind we might be to the most beautiful evidence possible). Isn't that the mystery of faith? Isn't this why we can never rule out any one or consider ourselves more highly than we ought?"[102] This approach espoused by Duncan, Johnston, and Detweiler is generous and optimistic—it is not limited to believers in any one religious tradition and proves meaningful for the deist, atheist, or humanist. It acknowledges the halting, fumbling reality of human nature, but allows for the spark of meaning and beauty in the universe to miraculously be revealed in human endeavors.

Church and Cinema: Rivals for Transcendence?

Using films as common referential myths lends naturally to what Johnston describes as a democratization of theological discussions. Many individual filmgoers would be unlikely to leave a theater in company without asking the question: "So, what did you think?" This question and the discussion that follows on the sojourn to vehicles, pizza parlors, coffee shops, or homes leads easily to elaboration on plot, characters, visual aesthetic, and believability. This discussion is broached by any age and often starts with phrases like, "I liked it when so-and-so did . . ." or, "I don't like how they made . . . ." Invariably, others disagree with one person's assessment of a film, and elaborate on what they felt was a completely plausible turn of plot or change in a character's behavior or experience. In many settings, the pleasure of discussing a film rivals the enjoyment of watching a film. Some critically or artistically oriented films even aim to fill the "movie talk" niche knowing that while the presentation may be bland to general audiences the discussion that follows it in academic circles will be lively. This circumlocution of films inevitably unearths themes and patterns that go long distances in revealing facets of religion and culture. Without the paternal presence of pastors or scripture, the process of observing and

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[102] Detweiler, 259.

dissecting culture, human experience, and God is undertaken by everyman at the cinema's prompting.

Christopher Deacy likewise feels strongly that it is the viewer's engagement with a film—and less the filmic elements like plot, editing, or cinematography—that enables its spiritual efficacy. Deacy explains, "Films can have the effect of enabling theologians to reassess theological principles and paradigms that they had not previously accorded much attention."[103] The theologically conscious viewer who watches a film will inevitably be prompted to dialogue with the film, either to refute what she is seeing (and defend why), or to broaden her viewpoints to include the depiction. Either case will require her to revisit her assumptions about the spiritual. Thus dialogue with film not only allows cinema to be influenced by theology, but theology to be influenced by cinema in return. Notes Deacy, "films—no matter how 'secular,' no matter how shallow or banal—function no less importantly when they *enable us to ask* whether the values that underpin our theological positions are really any more cogent, any more consistent, any more defensible just because they happen to be more established and have been around for longer than their cinematic counterparts. . . . Surely they [these films] can, they must, and they already do."[104] Thus the viewer of film is potentially enlightened and inspired through the task of theological inquiry regardless of how reputable or inspiring the film itself is—the participation is the key. Sharon Swenson expresses a similar thought, that "film watching provides opportunities to understand the nuances of our value-making system and to evaluate the values of the filmmakers and characters. . . . The film experience is not restricted to the theater but continues

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[103] Christopher Deacy, *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology, and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 163.

[104] Deacy, 164, emphasis added. Deacy and Ortiz note, together, "Film-watching can not only take on cultural significance but can help filmgoers to explore and construct their approaches to living, and in so doing can function theologically and challenge the artificial sacred-secular divide" (Deacy & Ortiz, 210).

on as we reflect and internalize and use what the film has given us the opportunity to experience."[105] A viewer colors the films they watch with their participation; and then, afterwards, the resulting amalgam is absorbed back into the viewer's body of experience and shapes their impressions of the world.

The more cinema becomes a staple source for cultural exchange, myth-telling, and paradigmatic narratives—the more it entrenches its place in the common body of knowledge and becomes a reference point in modern dialogue—the more it will impact discussions on theology. Instead of just discussing the nuances of their beliefs in churches, religiously-minded people have theological conversations in pizza parlors, coffee shops, and living rooms, gradually shaping a common sense of what God means to modern humans. John Taylor, speaking to students at the Fuller Theological Seminary notes these developments between film and modern theology, "There is a very, very serious conversation going on in our culture, in Western culture at the end of the twentieth century, about God. And the church is not a part of it. We're not invited to the conversation most of the time . . . and we are not aware."[106] Thus, rather than leaving theological discussion to bishops and pastors, theology *is* being discussed—and for the non-churchgoing, determined—without the church's involvement. As the touchstones of modern culture move from churches to movie screens, theology and religious culture inevitably democratize and move away from the twin powers of church and clergy.

Marsh and Ortiz join with Johnston in his assessment that theological debate for many (especially the non-churchgoing) will focus around the messages of the cinema rather than the sermon. Marsh and Ortiz, it should be noted, exhibit little love for organized church-going. They

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[105] Sharon Swenson, "Active Spectatorship: Spiritual Dimensions of Film," *BYU Studies* 46:2 (2007): 263–264.

[106] Quoted in Johnston, 14.

view church leaders as agents hoping to shore up their own power by convincing the religiously-minded to attend church services and be more informed, "and by association, conformed."[107] They feel strongly that film will move the theological construction done in society outside of the churches and seminaries and into the streets or wherever the object of popular culture's affection is dissected.[108] This self-validates the conclusion of a previous book coauthored by Ortiz, where she states with Christopher Deacy that "filmmakers, as modern-day storytellers, are fulfilling the roles of priests, shamans, and healers for our contemporary culture," sounding the anti-dogmatic battle cry, "Long may the journey continue!"[109] It would seem that for Ortiz, Marsh, and Deacy, transcendence is primarily an intellectual exercise, and the theater will replace the church in terms of theological construction. They suggest that in many respects the former is preferential and the latter obsolete. This near declaration of film as the new global religion by Ortiz, Marsh, and Deacy stands on the opposite end of the continuum from the likes of David Jasper who felt that film holds little if no relevance in the conversation of spirituality. While Ortiz, Marsh, and Deacy spend considerable energy decrying the church and Jasper expends his effort decrying film, Johnston takes the centrist perspective. His earlier notion of "common grace" is complimented by an equally essential emphasis on "saving grace." With Barsotti, he notes: "The movie theater's focus, when it gets it right, is *common grace*—God's activity in the wider world. The church, when it gets it right, is concerned with *saving grace*—God's activity in Jesus Christ. The one should not, and cannot, replace the other. However, Christians believe both forms of

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[107] Marsh & Ortiz, 1.

[108] Marsh & Ortiz, 255.

[109] Deacy & Ortiz, 211.

grace are a gift of the Spirit, so the similarities between churches and theaters need not always be disparaged. Their commonality is found in the unity of the Spirit."[110]

For Barsotti and Johnston, both modes of grace—church and theater, denomination and community—connect individuals to God's spiritual essence and are thus essential and complimentary for each other—not mutually exclusive. This is not to say that Johnston doesn't sympathize with Deacy, Marsh, and Ortiz. He asserts that humans long to be connected to God and are forced to look for spiritual sustenance outside of the "dogmatic constraints" of the church. He cautions clergy thus: "Currently, the church risks irrelevancy without its walls and complacency within. We have boxed in God and the results are proving disastrous. New eyes are called for as we attempt to see God anew."[111] Johnston feels that if churches fail to "bring the Bible into conversation with life"—by which he means movies—then an already prominent drop-off in membership and church involvement will likely intensify.

Detweiler begins with a similar take as Johnston, but reaches a slightly different conclusion. Similar to how Johnston distinguishes between "common grace" and "saving grace," Detweiler parses "general revelation" from "genuine revelation." While the films we view— much like the wonders of the natural world—can be spiritually enlivening and profound, "we must not confuse the creation with the Creator. . . . One must not substitute the grandeur of the sun for the glory of God. Nature points to God; it is not God. General revelation without the gift of (in)sight can lead to misguided affections."[112] Similar to Johnston, Detweiler feels that general revelation and common grace can take us great distances and teach us much about humanity's interrelationships, but it cannot measure up to the importance of transcendent saving grace or, as

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[110] Barsotti & Johnston, 18.

[111] Johnston, 14–15.

[112] Detweiler, 261.

Detweiler terms it, genuine revelation. The difference between general and genuine revelation, is that "genuine, life altering revelation arrives as a gift of God, mediated by the Spirit."[113] One experiences general revelation through appreciating the gifts God has freely placed before us. These may include the beauty of creation or the shared human community, or more; but for Detweiler, genuine revelation is not seen in nature. Rather it is a sudden spiritual awakening that allows "seeing through nature, recognizing the Creator behind creation."[114] A person becomes awakened to transformative, saving, genuine revelation when God's Spirit allows them a glimpse at what lays beyond the fabric of forest or film to a confrontation with the supernatural. Thus Detweiler states his claim that arts like cinema can help us recover our spiritual sight, "serving as another occasion for the Spirit to reveal profound and general truths about nature, humanity, and God."[115]

In conclusion, however, Detweiler departs from Johnston's perspective, which seems to favor saving grace mediated by church or scripture. Detweiler feels strongly that "the good, true, and beautiful moments (the general revelation) found in enduring art are rooted in divine longing, creativity, and inspiration—*genuine revelation*." If a viewer brings to their film watching a "more active engagement," then the experience will be "laden with revelatory possibilities and glimpses of the divine." Intently addressing his readers, Detweiler advocates a call to action: "We must invite the Spirit into our forays, whether to the mountains or with the movies. I advocate a sacramental approach to everyday life that can open us up to divine encounters."[116] While not espousing the anti-dogmatic approach of Deacy and Ortiz, Detweiler

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[113] Detweiler, 261.

[114] Detweiler, 261.

[115] Detweiler, 261.

[116] Detweiler, 262.

does elevate the spiritual possibilities present in the movie theater beyond what Johnston seems willing to grant. For Detweiler, it is an imperative for all persons to seek God "amid a resacralized world."[117] In his view, wherever such sojourners find enlightenment is more or less irrelevant—a thought which may "threaten those who like their faith drawn and quartered," but a thought that may most accurately reflect the unexpected manner in which God works with humankind.[118]

Paul Schrader is equally passionate in the belief that cinema can serve, like scripture or sacrament, to propel individuals into an experience with God. Though Schrader's book *Transcendental Style* is more than forty years old, the staying power of his ideas and innovations is impressive.[119] Schrader does not approach the spiritual possibilities of the cinematic canon with open arms like Detweiler, Johnston, Deacy, and Marsh do, though much of what Schrader suggests about cinema's highest potential could easily mesh with what Detweiler describes. Schrader takes a unique perspective that deserves separate treatment, if for no other reason than Schrader's influence on those later academics already discussed.[120] Schrader felt strongly that rather than looking at films qualitatively and considering overall plots and messages in conjunction with their delivery, transcendence could almost be induced quantitatively through a

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[117] Detweiler, 272.

[118] For Detweiler, the quest to understand spirituality and the cinema is intensely personal and not simply an academic pursuit: "Openness to God and the movement of the Spirit may threaten those who like their faith drawn and quartered. Yet Christ will accomplish his purposes with or without us. . . . The ways of God have always been mysterious, outside the box, progressive in their revelation. Try as we might to grasp the Spirit, she always seems to slip our fingers. I am comfortable playing catch-up, looking to the stars and the movies for signs of life" (Detweiler, 267–8).

[119] While Schrader is "best known today for his screenplays of arguably redemptive Martin Scorsese films like *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*" (Randy Astle, "Review of *Angie*," *BYU Studies*, 46:2 (2007): 325–26), the ideas put forward by his book have had considerable impact, such as standardizing use of the term "transcendental" to refer to films with a spiritual lean. Schrader's book is practically required reading in the field of spirituality and the cinema (and, in my undergraduate courses at Brigham Young University, definitely was).

[120] Detweiler, for example, credits his spiritual rebirth as a teenager to Martin Scorcese's film *Raging Bull*, the script for which was written by Paul Schrader.

film's aesthetic style; that is, the presentation of its characters, the choice of shot length, the proximity of cameras to subjects, the style of the dialogue, the presence of music, the structure of the narrative—all had a direct impact on the spiritual effect a film could have.

Schrader criticized the dominance that religious epics (like Cecil B. DeMille's films) held in conversations about spirituality and cinema. He is harsh in condemning DeMille's techniques and describes the assumptions governing DeMille's aesthetic of abundance (enormous casts, elaborate special effects, emphatic dialogue, swelling music, compelling characters) as "logical but mistaken." Schrader suggests that DeMille's style is based on an incorrect "notion about the relation between cinematic and spiritual reality."[121] Simply because something appears real, or photo-realistic on film, does not mean that what is seen on film becomes personal reality for the viewer.[122] The danger, Schrader warns, is that Hollywood's and DeMille's propensity to abundantly depict the miraculous for the viewer to see may lead audiences to confuse the sensuous for the spiritual—making spectators of religious films into sign seekers. Schrader seemed disinterested by immanence that could only serve as a distraction to genuine transcendence.

Schrader feels this habit of displaying the miraculous misleads viewers into thinking they can achieve spirituality passively and vicariously; that watching convincingly rendered characters on screen experience spiritual events or epiphanies will translate into authentic spiritual history for the viewer. Rather than a personal spiritual experience—what Schrader calls transcendence—he or she merely assumes, emotionally, the experiences of the person portrayed

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[121] Schrader, 163.

[122] Schrader observes: "Lazarus plods from his cave, the music soars; why is there no spiritual belief? The truth is, of course, that these films do induce a belief; … But this belief cannot honestly be ascribed to the Wholly Other; it is more accurately an affirmative response to a congenial combination of cinematic corporeality and 'holy' feelings. And for the many who require no more from sacred art than an emotional experience, these films are sufficient" (Schrader, 164).

and resumes their life touched by sentiment, but not by the supernatural. Merely identifying with the sufferings of a cinematic Christ, for example, is insufficient. In such a scenario, asserts Schrader, the film "has not lifted the viewer to Christ's level," but rather "has brought Christ down to the viewer's." Schrader feels that a spiritual film must lead those watching to "a confrontation," or encounter, "between the human and the spiritual" on their own and that cinematic spectacle only serves to interfere with an authentically transcendent experience.[123]

Weary of DeMille's cinematic abundance, Schrader advocates a sort of "stylistic austerity," involving "limited camera movement and montage, narrative simplicity, elliptical editing, and natural sound."[124] This reveals Schrader's underlying assumption: that if the film itself is too emotionally satisfying as a result of the rich visual style, the evocative music, or the inviting performances, the audience will never look "beyond" the film for fulfillment.[125] They will be led to "mistake sentimentality for spirituality"[126] (similar to Detweiler's description of mistaking the creation for the Creator). Conversely, Schrader holds that a certain level of cinematic asceticism was needed to allow the film to get out of the way and enable the viewer to be presented with the divine independent of the film itself. This is perhaps the strongest feature of Schrader's approach—its implicit confidence in God and man. DeMille sought to mass distribute spirituality. Schrader believed that, if given the proper invitation, an individual will actively seek the spiritual and God will be there to greet him.

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[123] Schrader, 164.

[124] Schrader conceded, however, that some sparsely used cinematic magic might be needed to "sustain the viewer's . . . interest," while sudden austerity would "meanwhile, elevate his soul." It was that cinematic asceticism that Schrader viewed as "the proper means of the spirit." For Schrader, "the transcendent is beyond normal sense experience," and to attempt to depict it would, by nature, frustrate the goal (Schrader, 164).

[125] Lefler & Burton, 292. Schrader felt the film should "deepen our attentiveness to a suggested depth of experience rather than distracting us by [spectacle]" (Schrader, 164).

[126] Astle & Burton, 144.

In the belief that films need to leave room for viewers to actively respond to what they are shown, the perspectives of Schrader and Detweiler are remarkably similar. The notion that a "more active engagement" is required to open the path for heightened spirituality is not held by Schrader and Detweiler alone—Deacy (and to an extent, Johnston) also describe the benefits of engaging with films viewed. The major difference, however, is that Deacy appears to interpret spirituality as mostly an intellectual experience that places all demands for spiritual realization squarely on the applied mind of the viewer and not on any of the filmic elements Schrader is so found of emphasizing. While the lines bifurcating the emotional, the intellectual, and the spiritual are difficult to disentangle (and often cannot be), it is clear that Deacy's form of cinematic engagement mostly describes an internal dialogue between the viewer and the film watched. While Deacy's approach in this regard need not necessarily be different from Detweiler's, Detweiler and Schrader both seem to encourage a more specific application of a viewer's engagement—that is, the dialogue between viewer and God. It is not enough to simply "engage" a cinematic creation. The spiritually hungry viewer must sacramentally wrestle at engaging the Creator in order for transcendent, genuine revelation to occur. While there is undoubtedly an element of will on the part of the viewer (emphasized more by the Evangelical Detweiler than by the Calvinist Schrader), the inspired and inspiring film can prompt and assist the viewer in parting the veil and allowing them to commune with God.

Summary

Why does cinema hold special importance on a conversation about spirituality and culture? Film scholar Thomas Martin noted, "Film is a medium of images which occupies one fourth of the average person's waking hours. One must realize that the medium will have a

tremendous impact on consciousness in general and religious awareness in particular."[127] There is no question that the medium of moving images has an enormous global impact on lived, daily life. Culture and religion frequently engage in a dialogue to shape an understanding of the nature of God. Understanding this critical relationship between theology and the role of film in culture can help engage religious seekers in the spiritual quest to know and understand the nature of God. Dialogue about what is seen in movie theaters and in front of the television has become the life force of modern culture. Because cinema is so engaging and its narratives so widely known, they have become central to modern mythmaking. Modern culture is shaped by these movie myths, helping viewers make sense of and communicate about the earth and the heavens.

Can cinema, as a new and mass market art form, perform the same well-established revelatory roles played by literature, paint, or sculpture? There are valid concerns about the largely money-focused origins of moving images and the propensity of Hollywood to prostitute its films to effect financial gain. Like its creators and its audiences, cinema has always been imperfect and perpetuated ideologies and assumptions that need criticism and deconstruction.

Imperfection, however, only heightens the miracle that spiritual power can accompany and transform profane creators and creations. Through the honest depiction or the earnest telling, spiritual immanence is expressed—we see the fruits of God with us and in us. We see the divinity in the natural world, in the human experience, and in our shared community. We appreciate the condescension of God into the mundane and everyday affairs of human life. And, if we are careful and attentive, we may be led by our engagement with the films we watch to a revelatory moment of contact with God.

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[127] Martin, 15.

The provocative nature of the film medium enables spirit and theology to inhabit the theater like it does scripture and chapel. This dialogue, for some, has supplanted the church, and for others, has deepened sensitivity to the theological realities in the lived life. Especially regarding what Barsotti, Johnston, and Detweiler referred to as "an honest depiction of a creature" or the "truthful telling of the human drama," film, when discussed, poked, and prodded can illuminate the human understanding of self, other, and divine.[128] Thus film, as a critical component of modern culture, will shape theological discussion, just as theological discussion shapes what we see in the movies.

While Schrader's work is certainly foundational and has posed many questions for film theorists and theologians interested in spiritual film, Detweiler appears to express the greatest confidence in the myriad revelatory abilities of the cinematic medium (embracing both cinematic immanence and transcendence). Deacy and Ortiz prefer cinematic immanence to all else, while Schrader is bored with immanence to begin with, holding to a very specific aesthetic for transcendence. Johnston welcomes the immanent and the transcendent, but prefers to reserve transcendence for outside the cinema. Detweiler, however, remains certain that spiritual experiences after the pattern of both God's condescension and man's transfiguration will happen within the confines of movie theater walls. He laments the dichotomizing of cinema's revelatory potential:

> General and special revelation are complementary gifts for navigating the complexities of life, for fueling our dreams, and for enduring our disappointments. Unfortunately, they are often placed in opposition, submitted to comparison and contrast. . . . Some emphasize the otherworldly, transcendence of a holy God (law), while others stress the immanent aspects of faith, God with us (creation). . . . [I suggest] we cannot understand one without the other. A

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[128] Johnston & Barsotti, 18.

transcendent faith can end up divorced from experience. And immanent faith can prove too bound by what we can taste, touch, or measure.[129]

If nothing else, Detweiler hopes to spark his already cinema-savvy readers to reach a little deeper into what they are consuming and see the ways the hand of God moves them and the world around them. But it may be premature to conclude that film is theologically meaningful for *all* who watch it. It has theological potential, but often goes untapped if viewers fail to dialogue with the films they watch (both by listening charitably and making demands) and the God moving behind those films. Johnston aptly points out that many cinemagoers lack "the skills of movie watching, let alone film criticism, so as to make authentic dialogue from a Christian perspective possible."[130] The key to greater spiritual fruition from the practice of movie going—for Johnston—is greater cinematic and critical literacy. That is, the difficulties that stand between cinema viewership and spiritual engagement are not dissimilar to the obstacles presented in other art forms—including scripture and sacred music. But if an increase in literacy and interpretive agility were possible for the viewers of any art form, it is certainly possible for film—the size of its audience and prolific availability increasing the opportunity and necessity of such an undertaking.

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[129] Detweiler, 263. Jurgen Moltmann, who Detweiler describes as his "theological hero," offers the following as quoted in Detweiler's book: "The real phenomenon is to be found in God's immanence in human experience, and in the transcendence of human beings in God. . . . Anyone who stylizes revelation and experience into alternatives, ends up with revelation that cannot be experienced, and experiences without revelation" (Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 7).

[130] Johnston, 14.

Chapter III

Aesthetic Practices of Latter-day Saint Institutional Films

The Mormon fascination with moving images has deep roots; the LDS Church showed an early and institutionally-driven interest in the potential of film. In the Latter-day Saints' earliest institutionally produced film, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (1913), the filmmakers demonstrated interest in bringing movie magic to religious stories. For example, when the angel Moroni appears to the young Joseph Smith, double exposure was used to make the angel appear translucent and suggest the supernatural nature of this heavenly visitor. Even the length of the film was considerable, reaching an unusually long six reels (about ninety minutes), which "was truly gigantic for its time, dwarfing prestige productions." [131] The premiere, held in Salt Lake City, is still the largest movie premiere in the city's history.

Mormons have always been fairly open to popular Hollywood films as well. Gideon Burton notes that Latter-day Saint congregations "used to purchase their own movie projectors and screen Hollywood films at the church."[132] This tradition lasted for decades before the advent of VHS and home video, which allowed "ward movie night" to become a common cultural practice in the Church. This was not simply a local effort, however; general Church leaders were aware of the practice and urged congregations that held such movie nights to be sure to screen films that "will raise the cultural tone" of the members.[133] From the beginning, Mormons were interested in and embraced film viewing. "All of these official Church efforts at creating,

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[131] Astle & Burton, 36–37. A film still of the translucent Moroni is provided on page 36 of the Astle-Burton article.

[132] Gideon Burton, "Making Mormon Cinema: Hype and Hope" (paper presented at the LDS Film Forum held in conjunction with the first annual LDS Film Festival, Provo, Utah, December 1, 2001), 8.

[133] Burton, "Making Mormon Cinema," 9.

distributing, exhibiting, and sometimes critiquing movies," notes Burton, "have created a

massive cultural legacy for Mormon film."[134]

Throughout the twentieth century, the Church had a practice of enlisting Hollywood

personnel to produce its institutional films for the church, leading, in 1953, to the hiring of

Wetzel O. "Judge" Whitaker to head the BYU Motion Picture Studio.[135] Whitaker "is arguably

the most important figure in the history of Mormon film. . . . [Judge Whitaker] represents the

development of Mormon film from its pioneer infancy into classical maturity. The similarities to

Hollywood's classical era are numerous."[136] Whitaker, who had worked at Walt Disney Studios

as an animator, producer, and director for nearly two decades, borrowed liberally from the

Hollywood system. He instituted a studio-based infrastructure, a move that allowed a consistent

style and a higher volume of production, permitting the films he produced to have a permeating

influence on Latter-day Saint culture. *Windows of Heaven* (1963), *Man's Search for Happiness*

(1964), and *Johnny Lingo* (1969) were some of the more notable productions during Judge

Whitaker's tenure at the head of the Church's Motion Picture Studio.[137] Whitaker produced films

"deeply rooted in Hollywood norms," a tendency that has continued for over half of a century—

evidence of Whitaker's enormous influence on official Church film projects. As Burton and

Astle write of Whitaker, "[He] has had more influence on Mormon filmmaking than any other

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[134] Burton, "Making Mormon Cinema," 9.

[135] The fact that Brigham Young University was the second university film school to be established in the United States, along with the creation of the Church's Motion Picture Studio, says even more about the LDS Church's interest in the film medium.

[136] Astle & Burton, 77.

[137] *The Windows of Heaven*, directed by Judge Whitaker (1963; Intellectual Reserve); *Man's Search for Happiness*, directed by Judge Whitaker (1964; Intellectual Reserve); *Johnny Lingo*, directed by Judge Whitaker (1969; Intellectual Reserve).

person."[138] In their estimation, it was Whitaker's contributions that allowed Latter-day Saint filmmaking to "truly come of age."[139]

Though the LDS Church's first feature film, *Legacy* (1993), arrived some twenty years after Whitaker's retirement, the practice of liberally applying the Hollywood style Cecil DeMille had popularized was still the preferred norm for films depicting spiritual or religious history. Similar to DeMille's films, *Legacy* featured ambitious production values and a spectacular setting. The choice to film on IMAX-like 65mm film (in contrast to the traditional 35mm), further added to the faith-confirming spectacle that *Legacy* was intended to be. With its rich sound effects, traditional editing pace, empathy-wringing close-ups, rich visual style, linear plot, psychologically relatable characters, and wall-to-wall symphonic score, "*Legacy*… clearly aligns itself with conventional Hollywood film."[140] By this point in LDS institutional film history, "Mormons, like so many other casual filmgoers [had] been conditioned to expect and enjoy the many conventional cinematic elements that mainstream film [had] accustomed them to" when watching official Church productions.[141]

Mormonism's Unique Cinematic Potential

This massive cultural legacy of film watching and filmmaking creates the possibility for some unique opportunities in Mormon cinema. Very few religious organizations have the centralization and budget that allows the LDS Church to create the films that it does.

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[138] Astle and Burton, 77.

[139] Astle and Burton, 95. Astle elaborates on how institutional films "came of age" during Whitaker's time: "Under the guidance of Judge Whitaker, David O. McKay, and others, institutional Church films transformed from an ad hoc individualized endeavor into an organized and industrialized process."

[140] Lefler & Burton, 291.

[141] Lefler & Burton, 289.

Additionally, some of Mormonism's unique doctrines suggest some interesting opportunities for making spiritually meaningful films.

The Jesus-centered nature of the LDS Church's official name (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and their signature book of scripture (The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ) leave many Mormons confused as to why other Christians may assert that Latter-day Saints are not Christian. This confusion stems from the popular use of the term "Christian" to identify someone as believing in Jesus's divine sonship and salvific importance to the human race, a belief that Mormons absolutely share. Many Christian traditions, however, trace their declaration of God's (and therefore, Jesus') identity to the Nicene Creed and root their understanding of what they believe about Christ to that document. Mormon doctrine, on the other hand, outlines a theology distinct from Nicene Christianity's view of God and what he is like, leading to the declaration on the part of some Christians that Mormons are not, therefore, Christian because they worship a different God than the God of the Nicene Creed. An alternate perspective on God's identity may lead to an alternate perspective on what constitutes "spirituality." These differences will (and should) inform the aesthetic a filmmaker might employ to create a spiritual atmosphere or lead individuals to a spiritual awakening.

For example, Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches that "the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's" (D&C 130:22). Thus, rather than eschewing the physical, embodiment becomes something that elevates a person and makes them *more* godly. This opens new avenues for cinematic experimentation, especially considering how (for Mormons) this belief softens the divide between immanence and transcendence—the sensed, physical world being a desirable step in elevation towards the transcendent. As Latter-day Saint film scholar Tom Lefler notes, "For Mormons, the sensuous cinematic image, like the sensuous world, might

actually embody the divine, not prove an obstacle to it."[142] Thus Mormons may more readily

identify with and celebrate the focal characters of Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987)[143] or

Martin Scorcese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and might also identify with those

characters' reluctance to remain aloof from the beauty and intensity of the physical world.

Compounding the similarity between the human and the godly is the Latter-day Saint

notion that eternal life is to "be even as I [Jesus] am, and I am even as the Father" (3 Nephi

28:10). For Mormons, eternal life is to know God—to see him as he is—a process only

accomplished when "we shall be like him" (John 17:3, 1 John 3:2, Moroni 7:48). Latter-day

Saints believe that they are "gods in embryo"[144] and made of the same essence as God himself—

a perspective more analogous to a mortal, generationally repeating parent-child relationship than

mainstream Christianity would allow. These beliefs about the human family and its potential

further disintegrate the distinction between God's condescension and mankind's ascension—

allowing human experience to not only be something God sympathizes with, but something

humans experience as a path to becoming transcendent like God. For Mormons, the immanent

and the transcendent would be meaningless without its opposite—to the point that the two terms

can practically be regarded as the same miracle. Though Craig Detweiler is not Mormon, this

perspective is remarkably similar to his belief as expressed in the spiritual potential of cinema

cited previously: "Some emphasize the otherworldly, transcendence of a holy God (law), while

others stress the immanent aspects of faith, God with us (creation). . . . [I suggest] we cannot

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[142] Lefler and Burton, 290.

[143] *Wings of Desire*, directed by Wim Wenders (1987; Road Movies Filmproduktion, Argos Films).

[144] John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2002)*,* 54.

understand one without the other. A transcendent faith can end up divorced from experience. And immanent faith can prove too bound by what we can taste, touch, or measure."[145]

However, while Mormon doctrine easily suggests a dissolution of the perceived mutual exclusivity of transcendence and immanence, it also allows for gradations in the manifestation of spirituality. Similar to Johnston's notions of common grace and saving grace, or Detweiler's distinction between general revelation and genuine revelation, Latter-day Saint theology provides constructions to usefully gradate both the intensity and function of God's divine presence in a person's life. In place of Johnston's common grace and Detweiler's general revelation is the Mormon concept of "the light of Christ," defined in the LDS Bible Dictionary as including:

> enlightenment, knowledge, and an uplifting, ennobling, persevering influence that comes upon mankind because of Jesus Christ. . . . The light of Christ fills the "immensity of space" and is the means by which Christ is able to be "in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things." It "giveth life to all things" and is "the law by which all things are governed." It is also "the light that quickeneth" man's understanding (see D&C 88:6–13, 41). In this manner, the light of Christ is related to man's conscience and tells him right from wrong (Moro. 7:12–19).

In Mormon belief, the light of Christ connects and unifies creation and leads people to do right and act morally, it is not restricted or withheld from any individual regardless of their religious beliefs or the circumstances of their birth. However, the light of Christ typically operates more as a general sense than as a distinct manifestation—something reserved for the gift of the Holy Ghost, a spiritual blessing bestowed that completes the Mormon ordinance of baptism. Latter-day Saints believe the gift of the Holy Ghost to be the actual companionship of the Godhead and the means by which God's salvific power is administered to individuals. The gift of the Holy Ghost also allows individualized guidance that may be necessary to lead

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[145] Detweiler, 263.

individuals to God's direct presence to be revealed to them. This second, specific manifestation

seems analogous to Johnston's saving grace and Detweiler's genuine revelation—leaving the

crux of those theories fascinatingly applicable to Latter-day Saints.

However, the distinction between the light of Christ and the gift of the Holy Ghost in

Latter-day Saint doctrine may not be a perfect analogy for Johnston's or Detweiler's pairings,

especially if the distinction between the light of Christ and the gift of the Holy Ghost is more of

an expression of intensity than a differentiation in type. Suffice it to say that variable

understandings of God's identity may propose their own unique and potent applications for how

God communicates through artistic media.

Content Concerns: Loving to Hate Hollywood

This institutional interest in and acceptance of moving images stands in stark contrast to

David Jasper's objections to cinema's terrestrial, money-oriented nature as described in the

previous chapter. However, while there is little echoing in Latter-day Saint culture of Jasper's

objection towards the economic impropriety of film as a religious medium,[146] there is

considerable institutional and cultural concern about the type of content cinema is often used to

portray.

This is best demonstrated in literature distributed by the church for teenagers and young

adults. The *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet outlines standards of conduct to help young

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[146] There is little, but there is some. As two LDS films scholars said, "Does LDS filmmaking have as its intention to leave us as viewers in a precarious 'rapt,' in 'mindless fascination'?" (Daryl Lee, "New Wine Mormon Cinema, or New Wine Cinema" [paper presented at the LDS Film Forum held in conjunction with the first annual LDS Film Festival, Provo, Utah, December 1, 2001], 34). "'How can we address faith on film and produce films on faith in such a way as to respect and exploit the very particular possibilities peculiar to cinematic media?' And I'll venture at the outset that you haven't yet seen many LDS filmmakers doing that—at least not with a great deal of success. In this regard I believe that Marshall McCluhan was right on the money in claiming years ago that 'the medium is the message,' a dictum that LDS filmmakers would be well-advised to remember" (Travis Anderson, "Faith on Film/Film on Faith" [paper presented at the LDS Film Forum held in conjunction with the first annual LDS Film Festival, Provo, Utah, December 1, 2001], 23).

members "with the important choices you are making now and will yet make in the future."[147] The pamphlet has become a sort of midrash for Latter-day Saint youth—a useful oral law that offers advice in applying religious principles to navigating modern culture, aiming to fit the vein of LDS Church founder Joseph Smith's direction to "teach them correct principles and let them govern themselves."[148] *For the Strength of Youth* is rather remarkable in the tightrope it deftly walks between explaining guiding principles and mandating specific applications.[149] The pamphlet's section on entertainment and media begins with a scriptural admonition to "seek after" anything that is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" (Articles of Faith 1:13). While the tools of media—cinema included—are declared by the pamphlet to be value-neutral, the content represented "can lead you away from righteous living" and "have an effect on you." Youth are especially encouraged to avoid media that normalizes evil, encourages commandment breaking, or is pornographic because it can "dull your sensitivity to the Spirit or interfere with your personal relationships with others." The closing admonition is to "select only media that uplifts you" while seeking guidance from God, parents, and Church leaders.[150]

This open invitation to make spiritually-informed, individual choices about media consumption is a topic of considerable consternation in Mormon culture among youth and adults,

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[147] *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City, UT: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2011), ii.

[148] "Some years ago, in Nauvoo, a gentleman in my hearing, a member of the Legislature, asked Joseph Smith how it was that he was enabled to govern so many people, and to preserve such perfect order; remarking at the same time that it was impossible for them to do it anywhere else. Mr. Smith remarked that it was very easy to do that. 'How?' responded the gentleman; 'to us it is very difficult.' Mr. Smith replied, 'I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves'" (John Taylor, "The Organization of the Church," *Millennial Star*, Nov. 15, 1851, p. 339).

[149] There are a few examples of mandates that are specific to *For the Strength of Youth* alone, such as the directive to not date before the age of sixteen, but these appear to be the exception and not the rule. This is not to suggest that the pamphlet has eliminated opportunities for pharisaical behavior. Individuals so inclined always find an outlet, whether in outlining the appropriate number of steps to take on the Sabbath or delineating what technically makes something a "date" and thus a violation of the pre-16 dating prohibition for Mormon youth (*Strength of Youth*, 4).

[150] *Strength of Youth*, 13.

especially as the applications of those standards are compared from family to family and individual to individual. The desire for a preferred application naturally develops into a collectively held set of unofficial "best practices" that will be followed by the faithful. Almost invariably, these practices involve MPAA-inspired efforts, such as "content counting"; Mormon viewers, for example, becoming more concerned about the number of four-letter words in a given film than in the messages that film portrays or the spirit in which the film is offered. These assumptions lead many Mormon moviegoers to fall into the camp of simultaneously decrying the evils of "the world" depicted on film, while consuming nearly every Hollywood production rated as "appropriate" by the MPAA that comes their way; something akin to complaining about the lack of vegetables at the grocery store while only perusing the candy aisle. Gideon Burton notes this trend, "Mormons do fight back against the worldliness of contemporary film, of course, but this takes the passive form of complaint or censorship, not the active form of creativity and invention." Referring again, to the thirteenth Article of Faith quoted in the *For the Strength of Youth,* Burton continues, "to put it simply, Mormons are very good at pointing out what is bad, but not very good (with respect to film) at celebrating what is a virtuous, lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy. Until Mormon audiences embrace their own articles of faith, until they actively choose to discriminate between the good and not just away from the bad, then there really is no Mormon vision for cinema."[151]

Burton is not the only one to speak about this tendency to want to censor or content-count. Mormon film scholar D. W. Arthur expresses much of what Detweiler stated in the previous chapter regarding objectionable content on film. Using himself as an example, he notes that Mormon viewers should,

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[151] Burton, "Making Mormon Cinema," 12.

be quite reluctant to judge [a cinematic] expression of a person's belief or aspiration or confusion in that [thumbs up, thumbs down] way. For me at least, some of my most annoying characteristics may be inextricably bound with some things that I'm good at, with some things about which I feel very strongly. In the same way, when someone makes a film or writes a book or does anything, the part that isn't working, the part that isn't successful, is really inextricably linked to the greatest thing about them. So that consumerist approach is unfortunate, and perhaps the most unfortunate result is that criticism is reduced to that level.[152]

For Arthur's part, this is not intended to suggest a "no holds barred" attitude contrary to the suggestion of official Church literature to avoid pornographic or spiritually destructive media. On the contrary, Arthur's aim is to ask more of Latter-day Saint film viewers with the films they choose to watch, encouraging Mormon viewers to forego what he feels is the pharisaical desire to count bad words or "bad parts" in a film and instead determine its spiritual appropriateness by the messages it conveys and the transformation it allows to take place.

Mormon Myths: Reinforcements of Epic Proportions

Though Latter-day Saints love and use popular films in cultural dialogue and as orienting reference points, Mormons may be more directly connected with their own religious culture and more prone to use denominationally specific foundational religious myths as cultural touchstones than other modern American religious traditions. This may stem in part from Mormonism's relatively recent arrival on the religious scene (and therefore with a new set of historically recent founding narratives), or its use of a scriptural canon filled with unique narratives of both ancient and modern origin. Another explanation for the staying power of Mormon religious myths could be the LDS Church's administration of a comparatively large and comprehensive religious

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[152] D.W. Arthur, "On Establishing LDS Film Criticism" (paper presented at the LDS Film Forum held in conjunction with the first annual LDS Film Festival, Provo, Utah, December 1, 2001), 17.

educational system for its youth and young adults that effectively dispenses an understanding and appreciation of those foundational stories.[153]

Sometimes the Latter-day Saint filmmaking impulse even works in tandem with these critical, identity-forming stories. Perhaps the most significant myth unique to Mormonism is the story of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s First Vision. This vision describes Joseph Smith's encounter with God the Father and Jesus Christ while praying in the woods as a young man. The account of the First Vision canonized in Latter-day Saint scripture especially fills the essential role of helping believers make sense out of their experiences and orient their actions. The account begins with Joseph Smith's confusion on religious topics, followed by his earnest seeking, and eventually a revelation of divine approbation. The narrative is ingeniously structured to help converts and investigators use Joseph Smith's archetypal experience as a sort of map to direct them towards their own encounter with Deity. Benne's description of religious narrative serving to interpret, relate, and model theology holds true with this example.

Joseph Smith's account of truth-seeking is made even more readily applicable for modern Mormons in the video "Origin"—a short film that is part of the *Mormon Messages* web series on YouTube and the Church's official website. "Origin" innovates by merging Smith's original words—read in voice over by a young woman—with cinematic visuals that immediately relate Smith's descriptions with the young woman's modern experience.[154] The young woman is depicted in a whirlwind of glimpsed situations—men arguing in the street, flamboyantly dressed pedestrians, university lecture halls, traffic signs, whispered conversations, social media pages, libraries brimming with books, chaotic websites, intense video games, and instructional

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[153] See Elaine Jarvik, "LDS teens tops in living faith," *Deseret News*, March 15, 2005, accessed February 24, 2016, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/600118667/LDS-teens-tops-in-living-faith.html?pg=all.

[154] "Origin," *Mormon Messages,* The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2013-06-002-origin?lang=eng (accessed February 24, 2016).

pamphlets. All the while the woman's voice continues with Smith's narration, asking "In this war of words and tumult of opinions . . . who of all these parties are right . . . and how shall I know it?" (Joseph Smith—History 1:10) Eventually, the woman finds herself alone in a park and the association between Smith's two hundred year-old narrative and the modern experience of the woman on screen becomes clear. She sits on a park bench, the camera angle allowing us to see that she is reading Smith's account of his vision—the same portion that the voiceover is speaking: "At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God" (Joseph Smith—History 1:13). Though we understand that the voice coming from off-screen represents the woman's thoughts, we simultaneously grasp that they are also the Mormon founder's original words. Though the voiceover and reenactment stops short of Smith recounting the appearance of God, the viewer sees the young woman bow her head and begin to pray. The viewer is led to assume that the young woman experienced something revelatory; not a physical visitation by God per se, but a spiritual disclosure of some sort that allows the viewer to sense the conclusion of her quest to know, a resolution that is belied by the contented smile glimpsed on the woman's face during images of her life following the moment on the park bench.

John Lyden asserts that "each generation must create its own myths and heroes or regenerate those of the past."[155] The Mormon Message "Origin" cinematically demonstrates a modern application and regeneration of the Mormon founding myth. Though this can be and is repeatedly done without audiovisual representation by the LDS Church's host of 90,000

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[155] John Lyden, "To Commend or to Critique? The Question of Religion and Film Studies," *Journal of Religion and Film* 1, no. 2 (October 1997): 14, accessed January 15, 2015, http://avalon.unomaha.edu/jrf/tocommend.htm

missionaries across the globe,[156] the medium of cinema operates under Church auspices to recirculate and maintain the relevancy of that orienting narrative. Joseph Smith's account of his vision in the wood near his home is not the only example. In fact, the regeneration of ancient religious myths may be the most compelling case for so-called "Jesus films," or movies that reenact specific religious or scriptural stories. The LDS Church has used the modern penchant for moving images to reassert the relevancy of those ancient or historical spiritual narratives, rather than replacing religious myth or shifting the conversation about theology away from scriptural stories—as Deacy and Ortiz have suggested that the prevalence of film-watching in modern culture has done.

In a way, this reassertion of religious myth is related to the concept of common grace described by Johnston in that it provides areas for cultural unification. Even (and perhaps especially) in some of the more thoroughly hagiographic and propagandistic films of the LDS church, the oneness with the wider world is exchanged for a sense of oneness across the fourth dimension—time. *Legacy*, *Prophet of the Restoration*, and *Testaments* all work to create a sense of oneness between the present and the religious heritage of the past. For example, in *Testaments*, viewers are encouraged to see the familiarity of Nephite life in the film's Book of Mormon setting. In it, young adults disagree with their parents, look for their niche, fall in love, and battle to lay hold on happiness. Adults do much the same, struggling to solidify their families, forgive their sons, deal with debilitating injuries, and build a legacy for their successors. The human struggle is set forth and the viewers see themselves at ease in the Book of Mormon's world.

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[156] The missionary training manual, *Preach My Gospel* recommends that all missionaries memorize Joseph Smith's own words to recite while recounting Smith's experience: "Memorize Joseph Smith's description of seeing the Father and the Son (Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17), and always be ready to describe the First Vision using his own words. Do not rush through it. Bear sincere testimony that you know it is true. Do not hesitate to explain how you came to know of its truth. Invite your companion to do so as well."

In this way, *Legacy* and *Prophet of the Restoration* function similarly to *Testaments*—uniting Latter-day Saint viewers with their spiritual genealogy—orienting them in a greater religious heritage. As Martin notes, films of a spiritual sort have an effect that "challenges the human life to make itself correspond to the higher governing forms if it wants fulfillment."[157] Films like *Testaments*, *Legacy*, and *Prophet of the Restoration* work to indicate a common rhythm for spiritual seekers in the Latter-day Saint community and function to establish and perpetuate Mormonism's paradigmatic myths.[158] Thus cinema joins hands with faith and solidifies core narratives by taking an excerpt from human experience and emphasizing its role as a "higher governing form," leading humans to spiritual realization.

The presentation of the Mormon temple endowment presents more fascinating opportunities for individual orientation by inviting participants to place themselves in the context of the first humans. This audiovisual experience is explicitly intended to provide a model for individuals to follow as they make their own journey through disappointment and transgression back to the presence of God. The presentation of the human spiritual journey in the temple is especially fascinating because it demonstrates how thoroughly the LDS Church has embraced the spiritual viability of the moving image.[159] In the Latter-day Saint temple, the LDS Church uses a video presentation as a backdrop for sacraments performed, this film replacing what would have traditionally been theatrical reenactments. Initially, these temple films involved little technical

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[157] Martin, 108.

[158] It is notable that in the case of *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*, sequences of the film were reshot and the film as a whole restructured in order to give the film greater appeal to a non-Mormon audience and expanding the effects of common grace beyond the Latter-day Saint community in an effort to proselytize.

[159] Or, at the very least, how thoroughly the church has embraced the concept of cinema's value neutrality. It is only as good or as bad as the work it is put to.

acumen—limited scenery, flat acting, and no special effects.[160] As mundane as these original films may sound, the Church treats these films carefully and does not make them viewable outside of its temples, requiring those who attend to verify their adherence to certain standards of conduct in an interview with their local church leaders before being admitted to the temple. As Lee notes, the temple presentation is "so sacred that it can't be removed from that kind of context without the potential for some desacralization."[161] Out of respect for this tradition, this thesis will only explore changes in style and what those developments may say about aesthetic trends in the Church's official films—not the actual content of the temple dramas themselves.

The impetus to adapt the temple reenactments to film was mostly driven by practical rather than artistic concerns during the construction of the Bern Switzerland Temple (formerly called the Swiss Temple). The difficulty of serving a temple congregation from many nations that speak different languages in a small temple with a single ordinance room complicated the typical theatrical presentation. Recording the presentation on film allowed attendees to hear the presentation of the endowment in their own language and allowed them to move from setting to setting vicariously (by the scenes on screen changing), rather than being required to physically move from room to room as was typically the case in Latter-day Saint temples.[162]

Other attendant benefits came with the film presentation. For example, the ordinance required fewer temple workers to conduct and allowed temple ordinances to take place on a more

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[160] Notes David John Buerger, "According to one source, this film was not a professional staging: there was no real acting, no scenery, and no attempt at sophistication. . . . This extremely conservative use of the technology was clearly not an effort to produce an art form but a means of efficiently allowing endowment ceremony sessions to take place in a single room in the new temples, rather than moving from one room to another" (Buerger, 60). Though apparently the Church did license some scenes of flowing lava from Disney's *Fantasia* for the film's creation sequences.

[161] Lee, 36.

[162] See Buerger, 60. It is interesting to note that originally, different casts would perform the different language versions of the film.

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reliable schedule. Also the recording of the reenactment made the presentation easier to correlate across a global church—fewer individual actors needing to be trained meant fewer chances for variation and an overall consistent experience no matter how far from Church headquarters each temple may be. Before long, the benefits of the recorded ceremony led it to supersede the live temple presentations in every temple except the Salt Lake and Manti Utah temples.

By noting the absence of paintings and other images in Mormon chapels, Lee points out how peculiar it is that the moving image is present in the Latter-day Saint temple. "There's a strange recurrence of the image in our sacred spaces," Lee notes. "The image is unwanted in meetinghouses, but the image becomes primary in the temple. LDS sacred [temple] experience, the highest form of collective sacred experience and ritual, depends upon a highly symbolic economy, in fact upon movies."[163] Over the years, the temple films have gradually grown more complex to the point where they now feature elaborate costuming, ornate sets, computer generated special effects, sweeping musical scores, and emotive performances.[164] What began as a practical consideration has taken on a life of its own. Even in this most sacred of settings, portions of the elaborate, DeMillian aesthetic have been applied.[165] Such a treatment is fascinating, given the emotional response and passivity that the commercial, Hollywood aesthetic is typically geared to evoke. By being led to emotionally identify with the actors on

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[163] Lee, 36.

[164] Prior to the release of the most recent temple productions, Anderson notes the following: "Here, then, is an exploration of sacramental issues that does not resort either to simple depiction or too heavy-handed emotional manipulation. As a result, the film achieves what Nelson Goodman calls "syntactic density," which means we can return to it again and again, yet continually discover therein something new and profound every time—the hallmark of genuine art. I have yet to see, however, an LDS film that achieves anything close to this kind of syntactic density—with one notable exception. It might surprise you, but the exception as I see it, would be the LDS temple films" (Anderson, 24–25).

[165] Though, on the other hand, there are departures. Certainly, there are close ups and plenty of emotion, but the close-ups linger and lead us to think. With regards to the increase in emotive acting, Aristotle pointed out that when we feel fear or pity in identifying with the protagonist, it may actually be the key to achieving genuine revelation. Bertolt Brecht and Paul Schrader, however, would completely disagree—seeing that identification as illusory spiritual experience.

screen, viewers may become too absorbed by the events depicted and forget to watch with a

symbolic perspective. On the other hand, identification with the characters on screen may be

exactly what is intended, given that adherents are encouraged to put themselves in the place of

the presentation's main characters. It may also be that the abundant methods of the most recent

rendition of the temple films are merely intended to rekindle interest and prepare attendees for

the more spiritually and physically interactive portions of the ceremony which follow.[166]

An emphasis on portraying and thus re-establishing religious narratives as cultural

reference-points is a common feature of almost all institutional films produced by the LDS

Church. Deacy, Ortiz, Barsotti, Johnston, and Detweiler have described that "spiritual" works do

not need to directly feature Jesus or religious topics, but the LDS Church has rarely deviated

from featuring explicitly religious topics in its films, the few exceptions being short movies such

as *The Mailbox* (1977), *Johnny Lingo* (1969), or *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* (1980).[167] The style of

the LDS Church's institutional films indicate similar assumptions at work as those of Jasper and

DeMille; that focusing on overtly religious scenes and depicting miraculous works to spectacular

effect best exemplify cinema's spiritual aspects.

Propaganda: Bringing in the Sheaves

Considering that many early official productions of the LDS Church drew from

Hollywood talent and thus the Hollywood style, it is hardly surprising that institutional Mormon

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[166] Yet, there seems to be much that could be mined in terms of content that cannot be elaborated upon here. It is curious that some films outside of the Latter-day Saint sphere (but admittedly spiritual in nature) have portrayed strikingly similar scenes and used precisely the same myths to struggle with questions about humanity's origins and its return to grace. Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) is in many ways a retelling of the Mormon temple drama. Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) also bravely struggles with these same questions of guilt, innocence, and recreation and even utilizes the Creation narrative in a way that would strike any Mormon as startlingly familiar.

[167] *The Mailbox*, directed by David K. Jacobs (1977; Intellectual Reserve). Admittedly, the final example does contain a religious atmosphere and the conspicuous observance of religious traditions, but the film is free of overabundant proselytism or Christ-figures. Viewers are led to identify with Mr. Krueger directly and not to regard him as a type or a symbol.

films would tend towards the popular, DeMillian aesthetic for religious productions. Mirroring DeMille's evangelical mindset and making films in the Hollywood style immediately makes them accessible and understandable for viewers. *The Testaments: Of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000), the second feature-length institutional film created by the LDS Church, was the spectacular pinnacle of DeMille-inspired filmmaking for the Church. "The scale was mammoth; it remains the largest production the Church has ever undertaken."[168] Enormous sets and lavish costumes were created to convincingly portray the ancient American setting for *Testaments*— even new words, implied as colloquialisms, were peppered into the dialogue to establish an authentic feel for a forgotten culture. Didacticism was thoroughly present, particularly in a subplot involving a wealthy, villainous straw man who works to persuade one of the film's central protagonists to leave his family's faith and indulge in a lifestyle of bold-faced hedonism. A thick plot filled with assassinations and courtroom sequences allowed theatricality to run high. Technological sophistication was apparent in a gargantuan earthquake scene where an entire city collapses into chaos and ruin. Sexual titillation was nearly absent in *Testaments*, though there were possibly the beginnings of a bathing scene—something for which DeMille had been famous—a plot beat that leads to a romance between two of the main characters. *Testaments* even cinematically reproduces paintings by Danish artist Carl Bloch, much as DeMille had done in his religious films. An additional similarity between another of DeMille's religious films, *King of Kings* (1927),[169] and Testaments is who was cast as Jesus. Charles Higham notes: "As Jesus, DeMille cast the gentle and fragile H. B. Warner, whom he had produced in *The Ghost Breakers* some twelve years earlier."[170] "Gentle and fragile" could easily be used to describe

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[168] Astle & Burton, 109.

[169] *The King of Kings*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1927; DeMille Pictures Corporation).

[170] Higham, 166.

Danish actor Tomas Kofod in the role of Jesus in *Testaments* (Will Swenson's voice was dubbed over Kofod's because of Kofod's strong Danish accent). The similarities between *The Testaments* and DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* are considerable.[171]

Most importantly, however, *Testaments* pays homage to Hollywood—and especially DeMille—in its manner of presenting spiritual events. The closing scene of the film is an excellent example of this. Using a point-of-view shot, the viewer is led to identify with a fictional Book of Mormon man who is healed of his blindness by Jesus during his appearance to the ancient Americans. Miraculously granted vision, the audience sees the man's first sight from the man's perspective: the smiling face of Jesus. In true Hollywood fashion for the emotional climax of a film, the music swells and the film fades to its epilogue.

In *Testaments* no expense is spared, and the "full arsenal of visual, aural, and narrative techniques" are unleashed in the service of "evoking the miraculous,"[172] allowing the observer—through the man on screen—to vicariously experience the divine through a haze of emotional rapture. Similar to how DeMille worked to present the reality of the life of Christ and the exodus of Israel using what he felt were cinematic proofs, *Testaments* sought, through the Hollywood and DeMillian practice of filming miraculous moments with spectacular effect, to establish the reality and thorough Christianity of The Book of Mormon.

Having followed the DeMillian protocol for so many decades, the aesthetic expectations of many Latter-day Saints have become entrenched. As Lefler notes: "Mormons, like so many other casual filmgoers [have] been conditioned to expect and enjoy the many conventional cinematic elements that mainstream film [have] accustomed them to. . . . To downplay emotional

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[171] Burton, in a conversation with the author on April 2, 2013, remarked that "Cecil B. DeMille probably visited [*Testaments* director Keith Merrill] in the night and said, 'Great job!'"

[172] Pence, 47.

appeals (or the music that so often cues emotion in the viewer) would seem to many Latter-day Saints to work against achieving a realistic presentation of spiritual moments on screen. . . . This is especially true since Church films have relied upon Hollywood's emotional techniques, such as mood music, to signal spiritual messages."[173] The downside to such viewing experiences, as Paul Schrader noted, is that viewers are so satisfied by the emotional rapture of events on screen that they exit the theater without being led to reach for God beyond the cinema screen. Viewers are expected to do little, to be transported nowhere, to simply have the depiction of spiritual events in an emotional framework dumped on them through cinematic abundance. Lee feels this approach to film watching is essentially a passive experience because the viewer is not invited to participate in the creation of meaning. "There's no question but we can look around us and see a full-load consumption of the image in everyday [Latter-day Saint] life. . . . We're consumers of religious images, but we would say that the emphasis is not on adoration, on the religious, but rather on consumption, on the consumer culture we've become without thinking about it."[174]

Due to a reliance on these Hollywood artistic touchstones, official productions of the LDS Church generally have not been a good reflecting board for Mormon culture. Nor are they intended to be. The elements of Latter-day Saint culture that are best reflected in institutional productions generally revolve around the notion of establishing shared religious identity for members and simultaneously proselyting to nonmembers. The generally missionary-minded efforts of Church films seem primarily interested in helping potential non-Mormons open the door for Latter-day Saint proselytizers, allowing them to teach the missionary lessons and invite prospective converts to investigate the Church. In this setting, cinema is intended to act in

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[173] Lefler & Burton, 289

[174] Lee, 36.

conjunction with actual, nametag-wearing missionaries, using the cultural *lingua franca* to encourage or prepare people for religious experiences outside of the film viewing.

Thus, the Church's film productions are not intended to be a revelatory end unto themselves, but rather a tool to prepare viewers to meet with missionaries or pursue a course of action with other transcendentally appropriate media, such as the scriptures. This tendency is true of the Church's bigger films like *Legacy*, *Testaments*, and *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*, but it appears it is also the aim of more recent forays into online content. Many of the short *Mormon Messages* (like "Origin," discussed earlier) are instructionally focused—again, with the primary intent of garnering attention and providing an avenue for a more traditional message (such as a conference talk, a scripture story, or a visit from the missionaries) to be delivered. They serve as teaching aids for Sunday School and seminary classrooms and are not really intended to serve the transcendent function Schrader, Detweiler, and others have alluded may be possible. All of these films effectively establish a common mythos and forge emotional bonds, but the films do little to explore the tensions and paradoxes of Mormon culture or doctrine—and, some may argue, they may not really need to. The Church has very specific, missionary-minded and public relations-oriented aims and likely feels that it gains little by institutionally reflecting on or exploring regional cultural tensions, especially as the Church's culture takes on a more international flavor. Besides, "many Mormons are unprepared for or uninterested in such cultural honesty," explains Gideon Burton. "They prefer that any and all filmic depictions of Mormons be consistent with LDS theology. . . . There is a tendency to measure the film[s] against official representations of Mormonism." There is potential for cinematic art in Mormon culture to help Latter-day Saints see themselves more clearly, but, as Burton notes, Mormon filmmakers must become less concerned about cultural protectionism and

be willing to "depict the inner struggles or factions of our culture."[175] Niche size, financial

constraints, the relative youth of the Mormon cinema movement, and an overall disinterest on the

part of the LDS Church to make that kind of movie (and audience reluctance to patronize that

kind of movie) may all explain the dearth of culturally (and therefore, transcendentally)

substantive films.

Common Grace in Official Church Productions

The LDS Church's recent activity with the *I'm a Mormon* public relations campaign has

been effective at celebrating individuals while at the same time drawing attention to the larger

body of the Church. Individuals are elevated as they share their personal stories and "theologies"

with a global audience, their perspectives smattered across the Internet, billboards, buses, and

magazines. The ads feature a member of the LDS church describing their hobbies, beliefs, and

interests, concluding with the redirecting phrase *I'm a Mormon.* The statements of belief in the

short films on television and the Internet easily access Barsotti and Johnston's notion of

"common grace," that Mormons are similar to other American Christians and hold similar core

values. The relationship individuals have with others around them is theologically significant.

Unconsciously shedding labels such as "cultish" shapes public perception and therefore,

theology. Thus, through the LDS Church's use of film, public theology is altered by viewers'

internal dialogue with the moving picture product. All of this is accomplished, notably, without

the requirement of actually conversing with a Latter-day Saint in the flesh. The objective is

described by *I'm a Mormon* creator Stephen Allen in an interview with *The Boston Globe*, "Our

motivator was, how do we help these young missionaries . . . overcome some of the obstacles, so

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[175] Burton, "Making Mormon Cinema," 10. A couple of pages later, Burton notes, "An entrenched conservatism is perhaps the single greatest obstacle to the development of Mormon cinema, an unwillingness to portray the true breadth of uncorrelated Mormon living, or to embrace the liberalism of Mormon theology and its richness" (Burton, "Making Mormon Cinema," 12).

they can share their message more openly?"[176] In other words, the intent was to allow Latter-day

Saint missionaries to more easily shepherd potential converts towards the LDS church. The ad

campaign was a success. After running in several test markets, it was discovered that adjectives

with negative connotations were associated with Latter-day Saints less frequently after the ads

had run.[177]

Robert Johnston's impassioned plea for ministers and theologians to connect religious

discussion with the medium of moving pictures is not overlooked by LDS Church leaders in Salt

Lake City. Other powerful media campaigns undertaken by the Church include the highly

effective Mormon Channel, which consists of a supplemental media campaign of short video

messages: one targeted at general audiences and one at teenagers. The videos are varying in

nature—dramatic representations (some reenacted, some animated) punctuate talks from Church

leaders, lyrical pieces describing and glorifying the family, parables from the lives of Church

members from various parts of the globe, and more. All of these efforts are dramatically

rendered to spectacular effect, featuring high production values, engaging music, and a concise

but thought-provoking tone. The Church frequently features these videos on its Internet home

page and encourages members to share these videos on social media sites to spread its

theological message in a way that is viscerally connected to daily life for the viewer.

This is not exactly what Johnston had in mind—he intended for the *already* available,

Hollywood produced films to provide the common body of mythic context for religious

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[176] Lisa Wangness, "In Ads, Mormons Introduce Themselves," *Boston Globe*, June 20, 2011, accessed December 20, 2013.
http://www.boston.com/news/politics/articles/2011/06/20/in_ads_mormons_introduce_themselves/?page=full.

[177] *Ibid.* Wangness reports, "Survey data collected by the church found that negative associations with the word "Mormon"— from "cultish" to "sexist"— dropped noticeably in the test markets that ran the ads last summer. Even "antigay" associations dropped, a mystery to even the Mormons, since none of the ads features someone who is gay or who advocates for gay rights."

discussion—but the effort still speaks to Johnston's suggested approach. The goal was to help the Internet-savvy culture of today interface with Mormonism and its teachings in a way that is engaging and promotes fruitful theological discussion. In terms of scale, the success of the Mormon Church's efforts with the *Mormon Messages* series is hardly up for debate. To date, the Mormon Channel has amassed an enormous quarter million subscribers, with individual videos receiving 750,000 views and other videos routinely receiving views in the hundreds of thousands.[178] An audience has been found and theological discussion prompted. What's more, the LDS Church makes these short videos readily available on its website for download and furnishes its meetinghouses with wireless Internet so that these videos can be used for instruction in church and in other settings for religious education.[179] Thus, for Mormons, institutionally produced film is woven into the fabric of theological dialogue to a degree other denominations may not enjoy.[180]

Towards a Transcendent Latter-day Saint Cinema

Though seemingly etched in stone, the prevailing status quo for religious filmmaking in Latter-day Saint culture need not indicate an inability for aesthetic exploration. In the decade since *Testaments*, the Church has begun numerous new media initiatives similar to the short, documentary *I'm a Mormon* profiles. The Church's recent *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos* (2011) series consists of short, shareable vignettes depicting events and stories from the life of

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[178] See "The Mormon Channel" on YouTube.com for official counts for video. Numbers were harvested on December 19, 2013. It should also be noted that other avenues for viewing these videos—by download on the Church's homepage or on The Mormon Channel website—will not contribute to the view counts for these videos.

[179] It goes almost without saying that in my LDS seminary classes, my students' favorite things are often the videos that accompany the lessons we have.

[180] It should be noted here, however, that Latter-day Saints do not generally utilize Hollywood film in the way that Johnston suggested to maintain a lively theology. Hollywood films are seldom referenced in the Church's General Conferences and Church employed religious educators are discouraged from using film or video clips that are not of institutional origin with few exceptions (usually historical films that conform closely with the institutional tone such as T.C. Christensen's *17 Miracles* (2011) or *Ephraim's Rescue* (2013).

Jesus Christ. Stylistically, these films decline from the intensity of the DeMillian aesthetic present in *Testaments*, though there remains much that hearkens back to Hollywood's aesthetic in general. These videos are based on short passages from the New Testament, filmed as vignettes, and uploaded to popular video sharing websites like YouTube. The departure from previous stylistic practices is evident in more than the changed mode of distribution; in his announcement of the new videos at the 2011 First Presidency Christmas Devotional, President Henry B. Eyring, first counselor the Church's First Presidency, laid out the stylistic aim of the new project: "The First Presidency has authorized the creation of a facility in the deserts of Utah in which scenes from the Savior's ministry could be re-created and filmed. The objective in that effort has been to remain true to the scriptural text. Like the scriptures which these short films follow faithfully, they may seem to you quiet. *Your faith and the Holy Ghost will create the emotion these world-changing events deserve.*"[181]

Three intended stylistic shifts described by President Eyring's announcement are noteworthy. First, no fictional characters or scenes would be added, though creative license would certainly need to be taken to create a filmable, coherent narrative. Second, the stylistic direction for these shorts was towards a simpler, "quiet" aesthetic. Third, and most important, the spiritual meaning of each video would be established off-screen—the revelatory moment would not necessarily be put "on" film as DeMille (and many Church productions) had done. There is much in the *Bible Videos* series that is similar to past projects, such as continuing the tradition of reinforcing the scriptural, Christian mythos. The second and third changes suggested here by President Eyring indicate a shift that hints at Schrader's assertions that classic, DeMillian

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[181] Henry B. Eyring, "The Gifts of Christmas," First Presidency Christmas Devotional, 2011, emphasis added. This concept of viewer engagement with the arts resurfaces frequently. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* stresses this type of involvement for viewer's spiritual experience to be fully realized. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) first published in 1975.

Hollywood drew too much attention to itself, obfuscating experiences that feed lasting spirituality. For the first time, the aim was to create an official Church production that could serve as a self-contained revelatory conduit for a spiritual experience, the transcendent potential of genuine revelation similar to what was hoped for by Detweiler.

The initial forays were similar to what President Eyring described—especially in terms of "quiet." There was a noticeable scaling back of filmmaking spectacle. Angels did not descend and ascend in glorious pillars of light, but walked in and out of scenes like any other character.[182] The frequency of edits was significantly reduced, with many shorter videos taking place in a single shot.[183] Close-ups are absent, and medium shots infrequent, keeping the observer at a distance that encourages reflection instead of identification.[184] Slow-motion and other camera-speed tricks are completely absent, leaving events to play out more naturally.[185] All considered, "quiet" seems an apt description of many of these vignettes because they seek to draw less attention to themselves, encouraging the viewer to think and observe without the distraction of overemotional sentimentality.

This sense of quiet came to an impressive head in late March of 2012. In preparation for Easter, a number of videos concerning the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus were released. Each video was markedly silent, without a single note of music or hint of nondiegetic

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[182] "An Angel Foretells Christ's Birth to Mary," *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. http://www.lds.org/bible-videos/videos/an-angel-foretells-christs-birth-to-mary?lang=eng (accessed April 3, 2013).

[183] "Forgive 70 Times 7," *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. http://www.lds.org/bible-videos/videos/forgive-70-times-7?lang=eng (accessed November 25, 2013).

[184] "Shepherds Learn of the Birth of Christ," *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. http://www.lds.org/bible-videos/videos/shepherds-learn-of-the-birth-of-christ?lang=eng (accessed April 3, 2013).

[185] The following video is cited as an example of this because it can be contrasted with the same scene in *The Lamb of God* (1993) where Peter and John run to the sepulcher where Jesus was entombed. "Jesus Is Resurrected," *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. http://www.lds.org/bible-videos/videos/jesus-is-resurrected?lang=eng (accessed April 3, 2013).

sound.[186] At the crucifixion, there were no close-ups of weeping faces, no swelling orchestras, no slow motion shots, and no raging storms. The audience was left to gaze on Christ crucified in stark stillness as he whispered his final utterances from the cross. Amidst this cinematic reverence, the viewer was left to actively reflect—reaching beyond the screen in search of meaning.

This communion between a traditionally DeMille-oriented cinematic tradition and a somewhat Schrader-like reaching for transcendence was short-lived, however. Just prior to Easter, a compilation video was released that combined all of the Easter segments into a single video. With an orchestral score, a quicker narrative, and a heavier use of special effects— including an awkwardly misplaced thunderstorm looming above an improbably well-lit Jesus on a cross quivering from an earthquake added in post-production—the stillness of the previous vignettes was lost.[187] In the individual segments, the editing remained largely unchanged, though nondiegetic music was added to each segment in the series.[188] What began as an exercise in quiet ended with the implementation of time-honored cues for emotion. The result, as Schrader warns, may be that the audience is so satiated by the abundance onscreen, that they fail to keep seeking. On the other hand, as DeMille discovered, the masses are thrilled and come back for more. Over the intervening year, the vast majority of these vignettes have included wall-to-wall music, regardless of the video's length. The original set of Christmas-themed *Bible Videos* have seen modification as well. Gabriel now materializes into and out of scenes before the viewer's eyes

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[186] "Nondiegetic" referring to sound that would not plausibly be taking place in the "actual" world on screen. A musical score is the clearest example.

[187] "He Is Risen," *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. http://www.lds.org/bible-videos/videos/he-is-risen?lang=eng (accessed April 3, 2013).

[188] With one notable exception: "The Savior Suffers in Gethsemane," *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. http://www.lds.org/bible-videos/videos/the-savior-suffers-in-gethsemane?lang=eng (accessed April 3, 2013).

and the actor's original voice was dubbed over with a different actor's delivery of the lines.

Following the announcement to the shepherds, a chorus of heavenly angels now descend from a

celestial portal in the sky.[189] Though there seem to have been broader intentions to experiment

with a self-contained transcendental aesthetic at the beginning of the *Bible Videos* project, there

has been a return to a commercial, Hollywood style of attention-grabbing, evangelizing

spectacle—especially with regard to soundtrack.[190] This shift suggests that though there may

have been some recent, gradual moves away from the style of DeMille's films, the draw of time-

honored Hollywood techniques may be difficult to resist and may ultimately interfere with the

Church's evangelistic aims for its official media.

While alluding to 1 Kings 19:11–12, Burton states, "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."[191] Indeed, though "weeping millions"[192] have enjoyed the cathartic

experience of the prevailing aesthetic, there remains much to be gained in allowing opportunities

for Latter-day Saint institutional films to prepare viewers to "study it out in your mind," "ponder

it in your hearts," and not "deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance."[193] Thus, as with sacred

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[189] "The Nativity," *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2011-10-067-the-nativity?category=bible-videos-the-life-of-jesus-christ&lang=eng (accessed February 24, 2016).

[190] This leaves a number of questions unanswered: why the sudden shift in aesthetic? Were the videos originally released without music due to post-production time constraints? Was there a change in directorship? Was the stylistic change made in response to poll data suggesting that Internet viewership preferred the videos with more music? Admittedly, this is an area for future research—collecting first-person accounts from Latter-day Saint filmmakers and discussing their aesthetic choices and insights regarding spirituality and motion pictures.

[191] Burton, "A Manifesto," 326.

[192] Lefler & Burton, 293.

[193] D&C 9:8, Moroni 10:3, and 2 Nephi 28:4.

text, sacred film may begin to serve a fuller purpose—garnering sufficient attention and then elevating the soul.

Chapter IV

Possibilities and Conclusions

There is little question that the Hollywood style (in the form of the DeMillian aesthetic) was and is the preferred style used in recent LDS institutional films. Though DeMille's philosophy for making religious films is often berated by film critics and theologians, it is foolhardy to dismiss the style he popularized too swiftly. DeMille's objectives were commercial and propagandistic and his productions have served that function well. However, the emotionally driven, propaganda-like aesthetic grows problematic if it is not supplemented by something more substantive because it can lead viewers to confuse the emotional experience they witness on screen for personal spiritual history and miss opportunities to deepen connections to God, viewers preferring instead to feed on the type of vicarious experiences accessible through the movie or television screen.[194] This may especially be true for younger audiences that are developing their sense for differentiating between emotional and spiritual affect.

What has been said of DeMille's films could be said for the majority of LDS Church projects in recent decades. As Burton notes, most institutional media efforts by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can best be described as compelling advertisements to raise global awareness and direct individuals to the saving grace and genuine revelation the Church proffers.[195] Even if the production style occasionally varies to reflect evolving Hollywood aesthetics, the evangelistic, attention-grabbing aim of institutional Church productions remains

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[194] Admittedly, a person's diet of religious films will not be that person's only source for spiritual sustenance. A person may prefer a propaganda-like style in film, but the contemplative approach of scripture in literature. Expansion in any area, however, will bear fruit.

[195] "The church's approach to film has basically been a propaganda model." Burton, "Making Mormon Cinema," 10. The word propaganda is used here in a descriptive, academic sense, without the negative connotation and cultural baggage it has acquired.

unchanged. The examples are numerous. *The Testaments* served its purpose to promote an understanding of the Book of Mormon's Christianity. Also, by taking advantage of cinematic verisimilitude, *Testaments* created a believable setting for readers of scripture to contextualize characters and events from the Book of Mormon. The *I'm a Mormon* campaign and *Meet the Mormons* feature allowed viewers to appreciate the lives and varied identities of Church members. Each vignette provided likeable faces to help viewers open their arms a little wider and overcome any prejudice against previously unknown Mormons. The *Mormon Messages* collection serves as an effective aid to religious dialogue, providing instructional assistance to help viewers maintain interest as they learn doctrinal concepts. The *Bible Videos* project has garnered audience interest in a semi-DeMillian quest to rekindle interest in sacred scriptures or at least provide an opportunity for viewers to see scripture stories in a place they frequent (in this case on YouTube, instead of in their Bibles). Even the most recent films used for instruction in Latter-day Saint temples seem primarily concerned with capturing and refreshing audience interest and emotionally investing worshippers in the narrative being presented in conjunction with temple rites. All of these official Church film productions have invariably used the commercial film aesthetic to renew core Latter-day Saint theological myths, draw attention to the Church's identity and purpose, and redirect potential converts to missionaries, sacred literature, or sacramental ordinances that will provide transcendent spiritual power. As an entertaining and emotionally affective tool for capturing, conceptualizing, and evangelizing, the Hollywood style is undoubtedly potent and has largely been successful in its aims. Stated alternatively, the manner of Church film productions reflect the assumption that spiritual cinema is an effective *means* to later settings where transcendent religious experience can take place, rather than an *end* setting for revelatory experience itself.

Because moving images have primarily been used in official Church productions to evangelize and lead on to other forms of participation, Detweiler's belief in the use of cinema for genuine revelatory experiences may strike many Mormons as odd. That type of cinematic literacy and expectation of involvement with the films many Latter-days watch is uncommon and, as Detweiler noted, is likewise lacking among most film viewers. In the assumptions of many Latter-day Saints and, arguably, the institutional Church, Johnston's middle-of-the road position on segregating "common grace" to the theater and "saving grace" to the chapel seems to fit best. The cinema and the theater may intrigue us and unite us, but salvific spiritual information is best reserved for scripture, church, or conference. Thus, the impelling drive for Mormonism to express itself on celluloid does not diminish its emphasis on the need for the Church, but rather regards it as a tool that can be used to assure and strengthen its centrality.

This preoccupation with a missionary impulse is understandable as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regards itself as modern Israel—a restoration of the ancient order revealed in eons past to Adam, Enoch, Moses, and Jesus. As the "latter-day" or final iteration of God's kingdom on the earth, the Church takes very seriously its mandate to "sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out [God's] elect from the four quarters of the earth" (Moses 7:62). Church founder Joseph Smith, Jr., famously stated: "The Standard of Truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear; till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done."[196]

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[196] Joseph Smith, Jr., "The Wentworth Letter," *Ensign*, July 2002.

Latter-day Saint missionaries frequently memorize this statement as a part of their training. The building rhythm, sweeping scope, and daring ambition of the quote perfectly communicate the Mormon drive to evangelize the world. Recognizing a global fascination with moving images makes using film as a missionary tool an almost automatic response for the LDS Church. The intent is absolutely to reach the least and weakest, but it is done with a sincere aim to fulfill prophecy and please God.

While the advantages of using cinema as a missionary tool are already demonstrated, such a unilateral position across all Church media may come at the sacrifice of the unique spiritual possibilities hinted at by Schrader and Detweiler. In surveying the history of religious film, Duncan notes that using the Hollywood aesthetic "of escapist entertainment in the service of the spiritual" would inevitably lead "to very fundamental difficulties and distortions" that would be the antithesis of what Schrader and Detweiler hoped to achieve. Duncan elaborates: "Commercial films have always tended to simplify, to do much or most of the work for the audience. Passivity and even an unwillingness or inability to think or act have often been the result. Producers and consumers are mutually implicated in this process. Popular religious narratives simplify spiritual struggle, eliding difficult processes and manifesting internal advancements through external means (as in miraculous manifestations convincingly portrayed through special effects)."[197]

Opening up assumptions about the spiritual aesthetic in Latter-day Saint institutional films—whether based on Schrader's and Detweiler's suggestions or experimenting with entirely new styles—could help free Latter-day Saint assumptions about sacred film, prevent the conflation of the spiritual and emotional that the Hollywood aesthetic encourages, and engage

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[197] Duncan, *Routledge*, 149.

Latter-day Saints in a religious or theological dialogue with the films they watch.[198] Adjustments in style may allow spiritually interested film viewers to remember that "religion concerns not just the finding, but the seeking as well."[199] Such an effort could be especially effective in a Latter-day Saint context because of the deep integration the moving image already enjoys in Mormon culture and religious worship, and the ability the Church enjoys to produce its own content without the same level of concern for the bottom line.

As the early *Bible Videos* films indicated, there appeared to be a confidence in the value of a course that would allow aesthetically "quiet" films to invite the viewer's "faith and the Holy Ghost" to create spiritual meaning.[200] For Latter-day Saints, referring to faith in this context implies involvement. Joseph Smith, Jr. taught that faith "is a principle of action,"[201] inextricably tying belief and engagement in Mormon theology and practice. Not only does the Mormon doctrinal and cultural heritage of active engagement have biblical roots ("faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" [James 2:17]), it is well established in the LDS Church's other canonized books of scripture. The first Book of Mormon prophet explains that God created "both things to act and things to be acted upon," and observed that man is "free forever . . . to act for themselves," (2 Nephi 2:14, 26). The Doctrine and Covenants records a revelation to Joseph Smith encouraging members to, "be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will. . . . For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves," (D&C 58:27-28). Drawing on these verses, the rhetoric of recent church leaders has accentuated

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[198] Though the author speaks with some bias towards Schrader's perspectives, it should be noted that Schrader's Calvinist religious background is theologically distinct from Latter-day Saint beliefs in several fundamentals—surely one of the most prominent being the nature of God.

[199] Duncan, *Routledge*, 149.

[200] See Eyring.

[201] *First Theological Lecture on Faith, [ca. January–May 1835]*; "Theology. Lecture First on the Doctrine of the Church of the Latter Day Saints," broadside, ca. Feb. 1835; Church History Library.

a focus on action and engagement. LDS Church apostle Elder David A. Bednar famously dwells

on this theme throughout his sermons, such as the following statements: "Endowed with agency,

we are agents, and we primarily are to *act* and not only to be acted upon—especially as we seek

to obtain and apply spiritual knowledge. . . . A learner exercising agency by acting in accordance

with correct principles opens his or her heart to the Holy Ghost and invites His teaching,

testifying power, and confirming witness. . . . *Learning by faith involves the exercise of moral*

agency to act upon the assurance of things hoped for and invites the evidence of things not seen

from the only true teacher, the Spirit of the Lord."[202]

The centrality of faith and action in Latter-day Saint spiritual experience could make

participation with moving images (the "assurance of things hoped for") in an effort to apprehend

the spiritual (the "evidence of things not seen") second nature to Latter-day Saints if they were

given the opportunity. This would give Mormons a unique edge in Detweiler's hope that greater

engagement with cinematic media would produce spiritual insight. Indeed, the required faith

spoken of by President Eyring at the introduction of the *Bible Videos* series seems to be

preparing viewers to step away from the Hollywood norms they had grown accustomed to and

use an approach similar to the manner Mormons typically use when they study scripture. This

development seems so striking because of the acknowledged and intentional shift in direction to

make the videos spiritually salient in their own right, "like the scriptures which these short films

follow faithfully." While it is difficult to know what triggered the eventual return to the expected

style regarding the *Bible Videos* series, the result is clear: a surrender of profundity in exchange

for typicality. Instead of stylistically leaving room for the "evidence of things not seen," the

series largely returns to the Hollywood formula of emotional cues, an abundance of vicarious

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[202] David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," From a satellite broadcast address to Church Educational System educators given on February 3, 2006, emphasis added.

miracles, and an attitude of consumption—transforming viewers from agents into things to be acted upon.

Independent Efforts in Mormon Cinema

All has not been quite so monolithic outside of official LDS Church institutional films—some independent filmmakers have made significant innovations. Though the important task of Mormon cultural exploration is largely left underdone in the Church's official cinema, Mormon cinema outside the institutional church has made occasional forays into the field. Films like *The Singles Ward* (2002)[203] and *The R.M.* (2003)[204] are famous for their exposure of American Mountain West Mormon idiosyncrasies, and provide opportunities for cultural insiders to laugh at and possibly recognize the folly of some of those common quirks. Other films like *New York Doll* (2005)[205] have delved more deeply into the Mormon psyche. There, Greg Whiteley collides the worlds of rock music and missionary work, urging the viewer to consider whether the judgments they would typically make about a person mesh with a belief in Jesus's ability to redeem and reform any individual to a new way of being. Though it may appear superficially unorthodox for Mormon culture, we watch Arthur Kane's journey towards redemption culminate not in his conversion (though it undoubtedly plays a critical role in his story), but in his reunion with his old band mates for a final rock concert. This type of cultural introspection is something that Mormon cinema needs more of—if not institutionally, than by filmmakers following in Whiteley's footsteps.

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[203] *The Singles Ward*, directed by Kurt Hale (2002; Halestorm Entertainment).

[204] *The R.M.*, directed by Kurt Hale (2003; Halestorm Entertainment).

[205] *New York Doll*, directed by Greg Whiteley (2005; One Potato Productions).

Films under the Mormon umbrella not directly produced by the Church have perhaps fared better than institutional films in regards to "common grace." While movies like *The Singles Ward* catered to and provided comic relief for a mostly Mormon audience, other films like *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004)[206] were effective at operating on a spiritual level outside the Latter-day Saint tent, promoting a sense of unity and affection towards "the least of these." *Napoleon Dynamite* subtly, effectively invites its viewers to widen their arms and accept those who are genuinely different from them, but undeniably worthy of endearment. This is demonstrated by several plot beats, such as the relationship between Kip and Lafawnduh, Uncle Rico's reunion with his disaffected flame, and Napoleon's quest for and arrival at relevance and companionship. Jared and Jerusha Hess, the creators, do little (nothing?) to ameliorate the weirdness of their characters and in some cases emphasize it with retro clothing and prematurely revived fads. We laugh at the main characters' idiosyncrasies, but not in revulsion. The tone of Hess's film is one of endearment—raising a metaphorical glass in a toast to the underappreciated, the looked over, the misfits, and the slackers. In loving the oddities of the Hesses's characters, viewers develop a sense of common grace that Barsotti and Johnston feel film is especially apt at revealing.

Aesthetic experiments outside of official Church productions have also taken place in the documentary sphere. A comparison of Dean Duncan's "Fit for the Kingdom" series with the Church's officially produced *I'm a Mormon* video spots is an excellent example of how similar aims can be achieved using varying aesthetics. Rather than the highly polished, professional look in line with the Hollywood aesthetic seen in the *I'm a Mormon* videos, the films in Duncan's project present a quieter, humbler approach in line with many of Schrader's suggestions.[207]

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[206] *Napoleon Dynamite*, directed by Jered Hess (2004; Fox Searchlight Pictures).

[207] See Burton, "Manifesto."

These films are produced by numerous individuals and depict spiritual realities intermeshed with the workaday lives of regular Saints. The films are rife with material useful in leading the viewer to Schrader's "confrontation" with the divine because they provoke the viewer to listen closely and carefully weigh the meaning and purpose of what is depicted. A "Fit for the Kingdom" style of filmmaking would not have to replace the Church's current aesthetic (and, with projects like Duncan's, it begs the question whether the Church need officially be involved at all) to make a contribution, but could simply create more opportunities for edification as a greater plurality of spiritual aesthetics are innovated and implemented.[208]

Richard Dutcher's films are filled with cultural and religious difficulty and paradox that invite viewers to dialogue with his films and with God. *Brigham City* (2001)[209] presents the title town as an Eden where people don't lock their doors and completely trust their neighbors. Wes, the film's main character, is the bishop and sheriff of the town. He is a stickler for procedure and rules, like how never does Church work while on the county clock. His fondness for obedience, however, doesn't make him uncompassionate. The film quickly establishes his generous nature as we see him visiting with numerous parishioners to encourage them in their difficulties or help them find absolution. Wes genuinely strives to be a man of God that sees the best in people.

Things grow difficult, however, when the bodies of several young women begin to turn up under his watch and he suspects the murders to be the work of an unknown serial killer living in his town. Brigham City has always prized its small size that allows it to keep a corner on

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[208] Young filmmakers could easily express themselves and their spiritual experiences and completely bypass the typical distribution model. A little imagination and a YouTube account can create an opportunity to share their spiritual narratives and experiment with different aesthetic styles. No high degree of sophistication is required here. Like with the Lumieres' early actualities, there is wonder and divinity to watching something unfold in a single, medium-length shot. Or maybe a young person could ask another person a question and the brief response is recorded and uploaded without any edits or adjustment. There is work to be done!

[209] *Brigham City*, directed by Richard Dutcher (2001; Zion Films).

innocence—Wes relates that he hasn't had to use his gun in the line of duty during a long career as county sheriff. Now, however, everyone may be a suspect and the town's treasured unity and trust begins to buckle. A Sunday school teacher in one scene asks (not in reference to the events taking place in her town, though Dutcher obviously intends the association), "Do we have to lose our innocence to gain wisdom?" She is referring to the biblical episode set in the Garden of Eden, where Eve makes her world-altering choice to choose wisdom over innocence. This reveals a curious tension within the film *and* within Mormon culture. Latter-day Saint doctrine uncommonly praises the decision of Eve and Adam in eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge to allow humans to progress, procreate, and eventually be perfected. Eve recognized that innocence must be shattered in exchange for the more desirable and godly attributes of wisdom and knowledge. Though Mormons are taught this in Sunday school at a young age, Mormon culture may rightly be accused of being preoccupied with the preservation of innocence at the expense of wisdom. Dutcher's *Brigham City* touches on this cultural tension: Mormon doctrine affirms the choice to leave Eden while simultaneously Mormon culture sometimes strives to reverse it. Eventually it's discovered that Wes's innocent overconfidence in his Eden had caused him to overlook critical background checks in hiring a deputy and hence failing to recognize the serpent by his side (a development foreshadowed earlier in the film by a construction worker relating events that had led him to start running checks on his employees—a percolating tidbit that eventually shatters Wes's innocent confidence in his deputy and leads him to catch the killer). In the following scene, Wes is forced to use his firearm in the line of duty as part of a dramatic showdown that concludes with Wes surrendering his innocence to protect himself and his community from the killer—the man Wes had trusted as his deputy for years.

The beauty of Dutcher's film goes so much further than considering this one tension, however. A simple conclusion regarding the importance of wisdom over innocence would be a pragmatic, but insufficient conclusion. In the culminating scene (presumably the morning after the confrontation with his deputy), Wes belatedly enters the chapel (it almost feels as if he was debating whether to go at all) and takes his usual seat at the head of his congregation while the sacrament (communion) is prepared and passed to the members by several young men. It is a scene repeated from earlier in the film where the weekly ritual is enacted in a routine familiar to any Mormon. As part of this routine, the bishop of the congregation is given the opportunity to take the bread and water first; only this time, Wes declines to participate. The viewer is offered glimpses of the congregants puzzled faces as they note the bishop's abstention, an act that is typically reserved for when a person feels unworthy to participate. It appears difficult for Wes to refuse and the viewer is left to guess at his reasons for doing so, though there are a few hints. Earlier, during the confrontation with Wes's deputy, the deputy callously accused, "This whole thing is your fault! You put a gun in my hand! You're supposed to protect this town from people like me. You brought the wolf right to the center of the flock. Bishop—what have you done?" His deputy further insisted that God had failed the community by not answering the prayers of his victims or his pursuers sooner. Though this may seem an accusation primarily lobbed at the heavens, it undoubtedly has an impact on the man who feels responsible to spiritually guard the flock as well. Perhaps, Wes could tell himself, he had not been sufficiently in tune with spiritual forces to sense the threat his deputy posed to the community. Ultimately, it seems that Wes believes his accuser—despite being an earnest, careful, and obedient man, he had made errors in allowing his generosity and innocence to lead him to overlook running the appropriate background checks. "I should've protected them," he remarks to the visiting FBI agent before his

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tardy entrance to the chapel. Despite Wes's best intentions and earnest efforts, he has come short of the glory of God and failed in his charge to his community.

The young man passing the sacrament is uncertain about how to proceed when Wes refuses, so he offers the tray of bread to the man sitting next to the bishop (the father of one of the earlier victims). After thoughtfully considering what Wes had done, the man similarly refuses. The young men move on, passing the bread to each congregant, each similarly declining as the opportunity comes to them. Wes's face is difficult to read, but it appears he's aware of the scene unfolding in the chapel. Throughout this moment, the film's soundtrack is stiflingly quiet, limiting the audio to the diegetic sound of coughs and shuffles typical to a Latter-day Saint Sunday service. Unsure of what else to do, the confused deacon offers Wes the sacrament a second time, extending the tray toward him with a pleading expression. All eyes are on Wes as he tearfully takes the bread and eats it and each member of the congregation follows suit, beginning with the grieving father seated next to Wes. After he has taken the bread, he clasps Wes's hand and the two men weep together. The film offers no explanation and quietly fades to the credits. The last piece of dialogue spoken (if you exclude the prayer on the bread) is Wes's despairing remark that he failed to live up to his charge to protect his community. Sitting in the dark of the theater, the viewer is left reaching, working, puzzling, trying to make sense of the gracious transformation that inexplicably happened in the film's final minutes.

That silence and the perplexing wrestle it triggers is precisely what makes Dutcher's films so spiritually poignant. Simple dichotomies, vicarious miracles, and bald didacticism are bravely withheld, instead commending the viewer to God's sacred instruction. As Paul Schrader and Craig Detweiler would have hoped, *Brigham City* steps aside at the final moment to allow the viewer to be propelled into a struggle that may eventually end in genuine, spiritual

disclosure. The official productions of the LDS Church may not need to follow this formula, but

Dutcher's work adequately demonstrates what can be accomplished with a little earnest faith in

the audience, the medium, and God.

Apples to Oranges: Borrowing for the Screen

Mormon artists working with artistic media other than motion pictures have strived to

produce works of spiritual import from the beginning of Mormonism. In more recent decades,

Church President Spencer W. Kimball encouraged Mormon artists in this task by saying,

> It remains for inspired hearts and talented fingers yet to reveal themselves. They
> must be faithful, inspired, active Church members to give life and feeling and true
> perspective to a subject so worthy. Such masterpieces should run for months in
> every movie center, cover every part of the globe in the tongues of the people,
> written by great artists, purified by the best critics.
>   Our writers, our motion picture specialists, with the inspiration of heaven,
> should tomorrow be able to produce a masterpiece which would live forever....
>   We must recognize that *excellence and quality are a reflection of how we
> feel about ourselves and about life and about God*. If we don't care much about
> these basic things, then such not caring carries over into the work we do, and our
> work becomes shabby and shoddy.
>   Real craftsmanship, regardless of the skill involved, reflects real caring,
> and *real caring reflects our attitude about ourselves, about our fellowmen, and
> about life*.[210]

It would appear from the large body of Latter-day Saint–themed art that Mormon artists

working with all types of mediums have taken this call seriously.[211] Mormon artists working

with paint and pen may present some unique opportunities for transcendence that are quite

different from the missionary-oriented mindset of much of institutional Mormon cinema. Film is

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[210] Spencer W. Kimball, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," in *Ensign* (July 1977),
https://www.lds.org/ensign/1977/07/the-gospel-vision-of-the-arts?lang=eng Accessed May 20, 2016. Emphasis
added.

[211] A great example of this is the art exhibit "Restored: Art and the Mormon Temple" held at Writ and Vision on
Provo's Center Street, corresponding with the Provo City Center Temple open house dates. The exhibit featured
numerous temple-themed paintings from Mormon artists. These paintings could be described as independent and
"uncorrelated." Each celebrates the Latter-day Saint concept of the temple in its own way, but not in the typical way
depicted in official Church materials.

a relatively expensive and logistically complicated medium—a reality that often obstructs experimentation. Because of the smaller scale (financially and logistically) of either painting or writing, an independent artist may more readily be willing and able to aesthetically experiment with these mediums than he or she would be able to do with film. Novels and paintings in such a setting have less need to justify their niche appeal or their expenditure of resources as would a large cinematic production. Due to these factors, a greater range of experimentation can and has taken place in non-cinematic arts and opened the door for some possibilities to be applied to Mormon cinema. Film scholar D.W. Arthur urges this sort of stylistic swapping:

> We need to know not only about religious films but we need to know about the religious arts. How have painters painted religiously? What is it about a cathedral that's religious? . . . Throughout architecture there has been a consistent theory as to how to make them religious. Have you read *Pilgrim's Progress*? Have you read *Canterbury Tales*, which, as you know, is a bit naughty, or even a lot naughty? Those are religious books. And Mormon filmmakers ought to read them, because there are patterns that are played out that speak to the eternal verities within a social-historical specificity. We cannot be primitives, we cannot be idiots. If you want to make any kind of difference you've got to know the language.[212]

While it may seem a simple exercise to take artistic works and adapt what makes them spiritually meaningful to cinema, such an endeavor presents its own set of challenges and difficulties that threaten to frustrate the whole process. Adaptation may feel automatic to some if we confine the scope to things elemental or structural, like a screenwriter reworking a novel to become a feature film. We are accustomed to this practice, like Zemeckis's adaptation of Sagan's *Contact* described at the beginning of this thesis, and oversimplify its difficulty. Written and cinematic media are profoundly different both in the way they are crafted and the way they are consumed. Compared to cinema, literature creatively provides only a skeleton for the imagination, sinew and flesh being applied by the attentive mind—automatically filled by the

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[212] Arthur, 20–21

reader's experiences and expectations. With many longer forms of literature, seldom is a work finished in a single sitting, allowing for the intervening daydreams between readings to mull the unfolding of what has been read. In a scriptural setting, this may be especially true, as verses or chapters pass at irregular pace, with deliberate and careful consideration. Many Mormons are familiar with this process as they are encouraged from a young age to consider scriptural exhortations such as "Moroni's promise," an invitation that the reader carefully weigh and pray about the Book of Mormon in an effort to experience transcendent truth. The complicated question of how to translate *that* experience cinematically is what has consumed this thesis and the writings of the many theologians and theoreticians referenced here! If such a translation can prove so challenging and multifaceted, then the undertaking of borrowing a feeling of style from one medium to be used in another follows similar challenges.

It may be folly to try—perhaps cinematic transcendence unfolds in ways unique to the medium itself. How does film, a medium bound to time, allow for the same pausing, pondering, and reflection that literature allows? How does film's photorealism leave the corners of an image to be filled in by the viewer's experiences and expectations? Are edits and elision enough to allow for meaningful participation or pondering to happen in a medium where what is presented seems to appear with no viewer assembly required? Given these complications, it is easy to see how the philosophy behind the current custom in Mormon institutional cinema emerged, preferring to use the Hollywood style of readily engaging cinema to build the muster of the viewer for more demanding tasks like reading scripture.

Further research is required to explore how aesthetical applications can be adapted from literature or visual art for the cinema with potential spiritual effect. It is certain that the efforts of the earnest creator will vary. After all, that may be the very point for creators of spiritual

cinema—to act on the impulse to "try the experiment" with "diligence, and patience, and long-suffering, waiting for the tree to bring forth fruit unto you" (Alma 32:27, 43).

Presented here is only a sampling—a few representative examples that may provide some possible "patterns" for stylistic adaptation in Latter-day Saint institutional films. From Mormon literature, Levi Peterson's novel *The Backslider*[213] feels especially relevant. *Backslider* captures "Mormon realism" in its sharp departure from the trend towards propagandizing or whitewashing the challenges of its characters that is often typical in LDS cinema. Instead, it focuses on its protagonist's struggles, doubts, triumphs, and ultimate redemption (a scene intentionally replete with details and images that many Mormons would nominally consider being antithetical to transcendence).[214] But herein lies *Backslider's* triumph. The reader completely believes the depravity of its main character, Frank Windham, but simultaneously pities Frank because of his own loathing of his fallen nature. Frank all but cries out, with the apostle Paul, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). Then, in the most unlikely place—on his knees in a church restroom—Frank Windham has his theophany. Though Frank struggles to be at peace with God and himself, God mercifully let's Frank know that God is at peace with him. With Frank, Peterson crafts his message for the reader, as if borrowing from Paul again: "For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:3–5).

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[213] See Levi S. Peterson, *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1990).

[214] This will be explained in more detail later in this thesis, but one of the most striking examples for an LDS reader is that the cowboy Jesus that appears to Frank Windham is smoking a cigarette. I don't believe this is intended to suggest that Jesus disregards his own commandments. Rather, I think it's a suggestion of what Peterson believes is God's willingness to employ an image that will help Frank know God understands him and that Frank can feel comfortable with building a relationship with God.

Backslider is unique in that it is not attempting to peddle a particular creed like many Church films do. It simply wants to ask its reader to consider some pointed questions about God, human nature, and how the two could possibly ever find harmony. *Backslider*'s refreshing realism and blunt consideration of its character's weaknesses may be an aesthetic feature difficult to adapt for general audiences, and therefore official Church productions. On the other hand, it stands to reason that short-changing characters by reducing their struggles to easy dichotomies of "doing good" and "doing bad" similarly short-changes audiences and may prevent them from doing the hard work of engaging with a cinematic work to form opinions, reach for God, and obtain precious revelation.[215] Spending time to develop nuanced, complicated characters similar to what we see in scriptural accounts could strengthen Latter-day Saint institutional films and easily provide situations where art assists in the opening of the heavens.[216]

In terms of Mormon painters, essential examples can be gleaned from the work of Brian Kershisnik[217] that posit some fascinating questions about what may be transcendent about the Mormon experience. Kershisnik's paintings are the perfect counter-point to artistic transcendence for *Backslider*'s realism because Kershisnik's work eschews realism, often depicting dogs, people, and angels engaged in odd or mundane tasks. Additionally, Kershisnik's paintings are indirectly religious—usually only the presence of an angel or angels provides direct references to religiosity. Besides a few notable examples (one of which is his mural, "Nativity"),

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[215] It does stand to be mentioned that frank discussion of sin wouldn't be wholly new for official Church productions. The Church has recently published a series of videos on its website that follow a similar path of bluntly describing sin in videos that are part of a twelve step process for addiction recovery programs. These films do little to censor weakness or the details of wrongs committed, though the depictions related by the interviewees are usually condensed into short vignettes that remove much of the nuance of the subject's journey (nuance appreciated in the reading of *Backslider*). These addiction recovery documentaries may be the only official productions created by the Church to begin with a content advisory.

[216] Consider Alma's exultant ambitions tempered by his assurance of God's omniscience in Alma 29, or the brief crack in Nephi's armor in 2 Nephi 4.

[217] "Brian Kershisnik." http://kershisnik.com (accessed January 12, 2016).

Kershisnik prefers a spiritual aesthetic in terms of feel more than content. The apparent

iridescent warmth of his subjects' faces, the colorful liveliness in their deeds, or the appreciation

for the silly and playful all suggest an optimism towards and affection for life and good

company. The titles often suggest that many of Kershisnik's subjects are family. Taken as a body

of work, they communicate verve for existence—as if simply being was its own *raison d'etre*.

One of Kershisnik's particularly impressive works is the mural "Nativity," which hangs

in the Museum of Art at Brigham Young University. The painting is immediately impressive

because of its considerable size (17 feet long and 7 feet tall). In the lower right-hand corner, the

viewer sees a woman nursing a new baby, two midwives adoring the precious, new creation. The

father kneels behind them, apparently overcome, a hand pressed to his downcast face. This quiet

scene carries on oblivious to what swirls above it, filling most of the canvas. A river of angels

robed in white sweeps from the bottom left, across the mural, exiting at the top right. There is an

excitement to their actions that contrasts with the subdued scene below them. Many angels wave

the throng forward or point excitedly, looking back to be sure they are followed. Upon reaching

the mother with child, their faces crowd together, lips parted in awe to absorb a brief glimpse of

the new life before the current of bodies sweeps them onward. As the angels exit, they raise their

hands in exultation and excitement.

Though ostensibly a painting of the birth of Jesus, Kershisnik deliberately leaves off the

article "the" in front of the mural's title, "Nativity."[218] Thus, the title suggests a universality to

the events depicted. Joseph, the overcome father becomes any father, pausing under the sublime

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[218] Kershisnik remarked about the title of his painting: "This painting is called 'Nativity'. The decision to avoid the definite article illuminates a particularly fascinating and miraculous aspect of Jesus' advent. Notwithstanding the overwhelming significance of Jesus coming, He came very much like you and I came. His birth was like your birth and mine. He came into our dirt and sweat and blood and milk. He arrived into our hunger and discomfort, just as everyone else on the planet ever has. His birth was, in that sense, unremarkable. It hurt his mother and Him" ("Nativity: an Essay." http://kershisnik.com/2015/nativity-an-essay/ [accessed January 18, 2016]).

weight of exploding affection and responsibility. By some measures, it is utterly mundane, as every individual to ever lay eyes on Kershisnik's mural has been present for such a scene—their own birth. Yet many who have held a newborn are not surprised to see the angels thrill to look in at the unfailingly startling commencement of a new life. The swift passing of the angelic river mirrors the feelings of such moments—passing before our fingers can close around them even though our lives are reshaped by their memory.

Kershisnik's paintings communicate a warmth and kindness that is difficult to avoid. This palpable affection brushed and dried on canvas demonstrates a final point and theory regarding the benefit of experimentation in cinematic aesthetic for official Church productions. While cinema (and all art, for that matter) may be a value neutral tool with various uses, as Church President Spencer W. Kimball pointed out, we reflect (and therefore reveal) "how we feel about ourselves and about life and about God," by the "excellence and quality" of our work with that tool.[219] What does the way an instrument is used say about those who wield it? While much good has been done and with earnest intent in recent official productions of the LDS Church, there may be more sublimity to cinema than what the typical Hollywood style has yet offered.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–46 offers some insight that could be used to sculpt a possible governing principle for a Latter-day Saint spiritual aesthetic. It does so by elaborating on the style of God's authority and rule—his "leadership aesthetic." The described exercise of influence on God's part may differ from the well-intended uses of the predominant secular, commercialized Hollywood style of using "a little authority" to exact "compulsory means." In contrast, it's an aesthetic of persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, love unfeigned, and charity towards all men. Consider the enjoyment and life present in Kershisnik's paintings; the eyes and

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[219] Kimball, "Gospel Vision."

heart are persuaded by the radiance of his work, allowing them to linger long enough to begin to seek out a sudden, still divine disclosure.

How this may apply to cinema has already been suggested by Dean Duncan as he describes what he calls "the cinema of charity." Duncan suggests that rather than being consumed by making religious films, filmmakers can create spiritually salient works by making films religiously—religion here defined in the manner James defined it, "to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27). Duncan states that charitable cinema is "informed by but not necessarily dependent on doctrine or creed," and a chartiable work "is marked more than anything by its attitude toward cinematic subjects and spectators alike. This attitude is courteous, compassionate, generous, and sympathetic. These are films made with love." Duncan uses the works of Jean Renoir as an excellent example of what he is describing. Though the films are "decidedly secular," they are "informed by nothing so much as his enormous generosity and his abiding humanist faith."[220] Using similar terms as Duncan, D.W. Arthur elaborates: "What do I mean by religious? . . . I mean stuff that's been filmed by two things: by expertise, by fluidity if you will, and by compassion or charity. . . . For me a religious film can and should be defined broadly as a film that is made with love or about love, and as such it's quite possible— and there's ample evidence of this—that some godless communist, or some godless homosexual, can make a film that's centrally religious. And how do you know? Well, it's by the fruits of the film. It's how you feel and how you *respond*."[221]

The notion of charitable cinema is powerful because it effortlessly transcends cultural and denominational boundaries. It may be simultaneously challenging to dissect, however, because it

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[220] Duncan, *Routledge*, 147.

[221] Arthur, 21, emphasis added.

is a quality inferred by the feelings of the viewer. Despite the difficulty in the identification of charitable cinema, it finds its salient worth in its invitation for viewers to "respond" to it and become involved. Thus these films may, despite their insufficiencies, prompt us to love them and love others because they "first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And in the viewer's loving response, they may receive the promise to all those who are "true followers of his Son:" the promise to become a little more "like him" and "see him as he is" (Moroni 7:48). Under the Mormon umbrella, films like Whiteley's (*New York Doll*) and Dutcher's (*Brigham City* and *States of Grace*[222]) already reach this challenging standard, as do countless others beyond the sphere of Mormonism.

While the missionary focus of many of the Church's media efforts need not be abandoned, there seems plenty to be gained by innovating with the style of films produced under official auspices. The age of Internet video sharing presents an ideal setting to cinematically experiment with transcendence as the medium becomes more affordable and favors smaller, shorter productions. Because of the depth and breadth of Internet viewership, niche perspectives and styles are easily accessible. Rather than aiming for the lowest common denominator as most current Latter-day Saint institutional productions do, LDS films depicting the spiritual could experiment with additional styles and reach a broader audience in new and meaningful ways. Rather than leaving viewers emerging from the dark of theaters spiritually empty like Isaiah's hungry dreamer, Latter-day Saint filmmakers working independently or institutionally may be perfectly positioned at a renaissance of experimentation in budget, form, and content to feed the spiritually hungry cinemagoer.

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[222] See *States of Grace*, directed by Richard Dutcher (2005; Zion Films).

They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them.

Isaiah 49:10

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