

In the World, But Not of the World:
LDS Cinema and the Globalized Audience
by Alyssa Whipple Rock

“The problem with film as an art form is that it is a business. The problem with film as a business is that it is an art form.”
—Charlton Heston¹

Over the years in the *Meridian*, an online Latter-day Saint magazine, there has been a vigorous ongoing debate about the future of the Mormon film movement. Some critics, such as film composer and co-head of LDSfilm.com Thomas Baggaley feel that LDS cinema is thriving. He points out that 2 percent of the U.S. population is LDS, which means that approximately 1 person in 50 fits into the target audience for LDS cinema. Therefore, he reasons that a film marketed only to Mormons which grosses \$1 million during its theatrical run would be equivalent to a Hollywood film grossing \$50 million—a respectable number.² Other critics are not quite as optimistic. Filmmaker Mitch Davis feels that Mormon cinema is merely a novelty targeted to a niche market. He feels that as soon as the novelty wears off, the Mormon audience will lose interest and Mormon cinema will fade into oblivion.³ But although these critics disagree on whether the glass is half empty or half full, there is a definite consensus about at least one thing: nearly all the *Meridian* contributors feel that if Mormon cinema is going to continue to thrive, it needs a larger audience base. The realities of capitalism demand continual expansion into new markets. This means that Mormon cinema must begin to appeal to crossover audiences which, to these critics, means becoming accessible to the mainstream American audience. While I certainly agree that Mormon cinema should expand its audience base, I’m not wholly convinced that LDS cinema would be improved by targeting the American audience. In this paper, I’ll discuss the potentially negative consequences of the mainstream commodification of Mormon cinema. Then, I’ll suggest untapped resources that should be explored in fostering a

healthy Mormon audience base.

As I've already noted, filmmaker Mitch Davis is one of the more ardent advocates in favor of marketing Mormon cinema to a larger audience. He states:

Over the long-term, I think the LDS market. . . [will] begin demanding the same things mainstream audiences demand of their movies—movie stars, special effects, impressive production values. I don't think it is enough anymore that your movie has a Mormon theme. The novelty has worn off. . . . So the movies have to get better in and of themselves. They have to get better and probably bigger.... Better writing, better acting, better cinematography, etc. . . . Often, but not always, better goes hand in hand with bigger. Bigger budgets allow filmmakers to employ better writers, actors, cinematographers, and so forth. . . . If the LDS audience starts demanding that LDS filmmakers spend more money on their productions, those filmmakers will be forced to find additional audiences for those movies, which means they will begin to be more considerate of the cross over audience.⁴

On one hand, Mitch Davis does have good grounds on which to base his argument. His film *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001) did arguably cross over to the mainstream audience. Of the one million tickets sold for the film, Excel Entertainment estimates that 200,000 of those people were not LDS. The movie was released theatrically in numerous countries around the world. The Showtime and Encore cable channels purchased distribution rights and occasionally feature it on their North American networks. As Davis furthermore points out, “you can buy pirated copies of *The Other Side of Heaven* all over communist China and in Vietnam, places where it's otherwise illegal to talk about the Church.”⁵ He credits the film's success to its high production values and to the fortunate casting of Anne Hathaway just before her big break in *The Princess Diaries*.

But on the other hand, Davis conspicuously neglects to mention that he tailored *The Other Side of Heaven* for crossover audiences by deliberately diluting its Mormon idiosyncrasies. The film avoids direct references to fundamental Mormon doctrines that might be considered “peculiar” to a non-LDS viewer. For instance, the protagonist Elder Groberg

heals a Tongan boy not by administering a priesthood blessing but merely through faith-based first aid. When Groberg explains why he cannot have sexual relations before marriage to a Tongan woman, he doesn't directly mention the law of chastity; he simply shows a picture of his girlfriend and states that they made a promise to each other that they would "save themselves" before marriage. For that matter, the Church is never named in the film and the word "Mormon" is barely mentioned at all. Despite having the tone of an institutional church film, *The Other Side of Heaven* feels decidedly non-denominational and it consequently seems somewhat feckless. It only alludes to the elements of the restored gospel that would have informed the key points of its plot. *The Other Side of Heaven* is evidence that one of the consequences of trying to appeal to the broader American audience would be the de-Mormonization of Mormon cinema.

Other LDS filmmakers trying to appeal to mainstream audiences have similarly watered down the Mormon elements in their films. I concur with Jongiorgi Enos's recent article for the *Irreantum*, in which he stated:

Pride & Prejudice is hardly recognizable as an LDS film at all, except for its setting, and much of *The Home Teachers* looks like outtakes from old John Hughes movies. Other than the mountains in the background, these are not home-grown stories. . . . At that point, when there is so much interest in creating crossover that there is almost no LDS element left, why not just make a mainstream film?⁶

I find it rather telling that *Meridian* writer Thomas Baggaley closes his article entitled "What's It Going to Take to Crossover into Mainstream" with the following advice to aspiring LDS filmmakers: "Don't set out to make LDS Cinema. Make good cinema. And then market it to the LDS audience. Also, market it to the rest of America. If the characters absolutely have to be LDS for the particular story you tell, so be it. If they don't, then don't make them LDS. Just make them good people who may very well be LDS."⁷ If Mormon cinema is going to appeal to a

mainstream audience, it must become exactly that: mainstream. It must lose its quirky Mormonness, as Baggaley seems to suggest. It must become homogenous.

One of the reasons why Hollywood is so successful is because it produces essentially homogenous products. Today the average Hollywood feature costs \$102.9 million to produce.⁸ These astronomical production costs mean that Hollywood films cannot afford to alienate any potential sectors of its audience base. Hollywood films are calculated to appeal to the lowest common denominator, which means that most political, religious, or intellectual messages are downplayed or neutralized for fear of offending audiences. What I find particularly interesting about the discussion in the *Meridian* over the need for Mormon cinema to “crossover to mainstream” is that it is framed largely in Hollywood’s terms. Thomas Baggaley, Mitch Davis, and LDS director Keith Merrill (also a regular contributor) never question whether the Hollywood filmmaking model is the most appropriate one for LDS filmmakers. Rather, their articles either discuss how Mormon filmmakers can begin breaking into the mainstream industry or they complain about Hollywood’s unwillingness to acknowledge the success of more family-friendly media. Their vision for the future of Mormon cinema is that of a mini-Hollywood industry—complete with mini-blockbusters. It is clear that many of the current Mormon film practitioners share this vision for the most part. Halestorm founders Dave Hunter and Kurt Hale recently built a \$5 million film studio in Provo which features two large sound stages, a recording studio, mixing console, band accommodations, several video editing suites and full high-definition editing capabilities.⁹ Interestingly enough, in an associated press article about the studio entitled “Can Utah Be a Wholesome Hollywood?,” Dave Hunter stated: “We’re done engaging the Mormon audience” because, as Kurt Hale adds, “There’s just not enough

Mormons.”¹⁰ In addition to creating their own films, Halestorm has announced they hope to attract at least two Hollywood feature films to their studio every year.¹¹

Halestorm aside, I would conjecture that many of the directors of recent Mormon films also have their sights set for Hollywood and the mainstream audience. Several of these directors are young graduates of BYU’s film program, such as Andrew Black (*Pride & Prejudice* 2003) and Ryan Little (*Saints and Soldiers* 2003). I would therefore suggest that many of these young directors are not necessarily motivated to make Mormon films out of a sincere commitment to LDS art, but merely as a way to gain experience and recognition as filmmakers. This would explain why they have a tendency to downplay or remove any specifically Mormon signifiers from their films: their end goal is to eventually become mainstream filmmakers and they are simply using LDS cinema as a means to this end. Let me be clear from the outset that I certainly don’t feel that it is wrong for Mormon filmmakers to work in Hollywood. We need just as many good Latter-day Saints who can wield an influence on the mainstream industry from within as from without. However, I worry that an overtly mainstream mindset could have a damaging effect on the LDS film movement itself.

While I have no personal quarrel with Hollywood per se, I feel that the most innovative and interesting work in cinema is being done in alternative film movements, film from the margins—documentary, independent, and foreign cinema. Because of its marginal status, Mormon cinema has the potential to develop new aesthetics, new ways of expressing ideas and telling stories. It can also explore perspectives and tell narratives that would otherwise go unexplored or untold. To exchange our marginality for wider distribution and so-called higher production values would be to lose our opportunity to create honest and unique art. In other

words, “for what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

Unfortunately, the need to maintain our marginality and otherness is in conflict with the need for a wider audience. I agree with the *Meridian* commentators that Mormon cinema needs to widen its audience base by expanding into new markets, but I don’t believe that targeting mainstream America is the answer. I would argue that we have another viable alternative. There is an LDS market which, to date, remains untapped: the international LDS market. For well over a decade, church membership outside of the United States has been growing faster than within, especially in Central and South America. Although there are no geographical locations where Mormons are as densely populated as Utah—where Mormons constitute 70% of the population— there are a few international countries where there are substantial populations. Church membership in Mexico is over a million members strong. In Brazil, there are over 860,000 members.¹² You might be interested to know that in Polynesian countries such as Tonga, church membership averages 32%. That’s actually slightly better than Idaho, where Mormons constitute 26% of the population.¹³ Most Mormon films usually premiere on Idaho screens at some point, why not Tonga?

I’m of course not so naive as to suggest that marketing, distributing and exhibiting films in foreign countries is a simple and straightforward process—a point to which I will return later. But there are three reasons why I feel this idea, as crazy as it sounds, should be considered. The first reason is that Hollywood achieved its success through aggressive international expansion. Although it is difficult to conceive of today, Hollywood was once an alternative, independent cinema too. Hollywood began as a simple cottage industry in Los Angeles by two British

immigrants named William and David Horsley in 1911. One of the reasons why the Horsleys decided to set up operations in Los Angeles was because of its relative proximity to the Mexican border: the Horsleys were actually fugitives from the law—wanted because of a patent infringement lawsuit—and they anticipated the need to run from government officials at any moment. However, not long after setting up their first studio, the Horsleys realized that the climate in California was perfect for filming. In the days before affordable fresnels and floodlights, constant sunshine was a vital necessity. Unlike the studios in the East where the unpredictable weather patterns caused numerous delays, the Horsley's Nestor Company became quite prolific, churning out several films on a monthly basis which they shipped to independent exhibitors back in the East. The Nestor Company prospered greatly in just a short space of time and, in 1912, several other studios rushed to Los Angeles seeking the secret to Nestor's increased productivity and improved photographic quality. In this year, fifteen studios set up camp in Hollywood and began shooting films.¹⁴

A year or so later, the heads of these now prospering Hollywood studios realized that they could increase their profits by expanding their distribution borders. The average Hollywood feature at this time rarely cost more than \$500,000 to make. These production costs could often be recouped simply by exhibiting the film in America alone. However, if it was shown to foreign audiences, it meant the film could easily bring in revenues of over a million dollars.¹⁵ As the production budget for films became more expensive, it became imperative to market them abroad. Foreign markets soon became an integral part of Hollywood's economic system and Americans aggressively fought to ensure that their films were shown in foreign lands. Following World War I, Paramount studio executive Adolph Zukor took some aggressive steps which

would guarantee that American cinema saturated foreign screens. He created an organization known as the MPPDA (the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America) which worked in cooperation with the U.S. Trade Commission to wage legal disputes and work with foreign governments to draft anti-protectionist legislation which would allow American film companies to fill the theaters in countries abroad.¹⁶ Between 1914 and 1916, Hollywood studios created strong distribution arms throughout the world, effectively carving up the globe between themselves. The entire globe was essentially divided between four Hollywood studios: Fox, Universal, Goldwyn, and Paramount.¹⁷ Today distribution companies labor tirelessly to ensure that Hollywood continues to have a stronghold over the international audience. Studio moguls know that the foreign market is the key to continued success. Foreign distribution accounts for more than 50% of the industry's revenues. Even if a film flops in America, baseline production costs can usually be recouped by marketing the film abroad. And when a film is a hit in America, foreign markets only increase profits. It is certainly not my intention to privilege Hollywood as the example for Mormon cinema to follow; I merely cite it as an example of the importance of foreign distribution to cinema in general. I should point out that other national cinemas and independent production companies similarly depend upon foreign distribution—often to an even greater degree. Therefore, it isn't so farfetched to suggest that the international LDS market could also stimulate the growth of the Mormon film movement.

The second reason why we should consider reaching out to the international LDS community is that it would help the Mormon film movement to mature and deepen. Too long has our definition of Mormon cinema been confined to “Utah” Mormonism or at least “continental U.S.” Mormonism. Of the handful of Mormon movies which have been produced

in the last five years, very few would be accessible to members of the church outside the United States. The Halestorm comedies would be virtually incomprehensible to the international community. However, my sense is that if LDS filmmakers begin making films with an international audience in mind, the scope and tone of these films would acquire more depth and subtlety. Mormon cinema would begin exploring its own rich liminalities. Filmmakers would tell different stories and pose new questions, such as how one's identity as a member of this church is cross-cut or nuanced by one's nationality, culture, race, gender, class, language, or one's previous religion.

Christian Vuissa's short film *Roots and Wings* (2002) is a step in the right direction. The screenwriter Augustina Perez's own multi-layered identity as a Hispanic convert clearly informs the film and defines its sensibilities. *Roots and Wings* explores the struggles between Rubén, a devoted Catholic and father of a Mexican family living in the United States, and his wife Antonia, who has taken the missionary discussions and has decided to be baptized into the LDS church. His wife and daughter's decision to join an American religion not only threatens their family unity, but their cultural ties to Mexico and the local Hispanic community. The conflict is aggravated by Rubén's sense that his children are becoming Americanized, evidenced by their eldest son's preference for English over Spanish and basketball over soccer. One of the best aspects of *Roots and Wings* is that it doesn't yield to the pressure for a typically sanguine American happy ending. Although he takes the discussions, Rubén does not join the church. However, the conflict between husband and wife is resolved through a loving compromise. Antonia allows their newly baptized daughter to participate in a Catholic ceremony and Rubén gives permission for their eight-year-old son's baptism. Their commitment to each other is

symbolized by Rubén's surprise birthday present to Antonia: a beautiful wooden chest which contains family journals and albums and upon which Rubén has hand-carved an image of the Salt Lake temple. Vuissa's film is notable for its honesty and its sincere exploration of the very real cultural and familial complications and sacrifices involved in conversion. *Roots and Wings* is the kind of film that would translate over to an international LDS audience.

The third and perhaps most compelling reason why we should expand LDS cinema abroad is that Mormon cinema could possibly be a unifying force as the larger LDS community becomes increasingly globalized, decentralized, and heterogeneous. I share Arjun Appadurai's hopeful vision of a future in which mass media such as film and television will be the catalyst for imagining transnational communities and identities. Appadurai states:

Part of what the mass media makes possible, because of the conditions of collective reading, criticism, and pleasure, is what I have elsewhere called a "community of sentiment," a group that begins to imagine and feel things together. As Benedict Anderson has shown so well, print capitalism can be one important way in which groups who have never been in face-to-face contact can begin to think of themselves as Indonesian or Indian or Malaysian. But other forms of electronic capitalism can have similar, and even more powerful effects, for they do not work only at the level of the nation-state. Collective experiences of mass media, especially film and video, can create sodalities of worship and charisma.¹⁸

Film and television can potentially aid in the creation and unification of a global LDS community and culture. Our church's biannual General Conferences already function this way to a certain degree. When a member of the First Presidency opens with the ritualistic announcement that members of the Church are listening to the conference through satellite broadcast, television, radio, and the Internet, there is a sense of a globalized connectedness and unity among the church members. Furthermore, general authorities increasingly emphasize the global scope of the church by highlighting stories about international church members in their

conference addresses. In the October 2004 conference, for example, Elder Richard J. Maynes of the Seventy discussed at length the faithfulness of Brother and Sister Abasanta, a dedicated Filipino couple who had been church members for 22 years and were raising 17 children.¹⁹ Maynes and other general authorities share stories about church members throughout the world not only to illustrate gospel living but also to reinforce the sense of a collective multinational LDS identity. In a similar vein, a transnationally-oriented Mormon cinema could identify, negotiate and explore the meaning of membership within a global LDS community with more depth and detail than the pulpit can allow. By cinematically representing the rich and dynamic experiences of members such as the Abasantas, LDS filmmakers would help Mormons on opposite ends of the globe to feel more aware of, concerned about, and connected to their fellow church members.

Institutional LDS cinema has already begun developing in this direction. The church's recent installment of seminary videos, for example, are clearly designed to create multinational LDS sodalities. From what I can remember of my high school days, I recall that the seminary videos back then depicted stories about mostly middle-class white American teenagers experiencing various spiritual dilemmas. The new seminary videos seem to have shifted in focus. One video from the Doctrine and Covenants series entitled *I Will Follow the Lord*, features a panoply of multinational church members struggling to follow the prophet's counsel. A pair of home teachers from Ghana must choose whether to continue visiting an inactive member who refuses to answer his door. Two Japanese girls debate whether they should attend a questionable movie. A young Brazilian struggles over the prophet's counsel to avoid serious dating before a mission. Interestingly enough, the film appears to be shot on location and all the

characters speak in their native language with English subtitles. A more cynical reading of this short film would see it as a suspiciously apologetic or self-conscious attempt at affirmative action. However, I feel that *I Will Follow the Lord* is genuinely progressive. This seminary video indicates a sincere effort by the church to represent a more inclusive, globally-conscious definition of the Mormon experience—which is much more than can be said of independent Mormon cinema at this point.

Nevertheless, the didactic scope and purpose of institutional LDS cinema imposes obvious limitations. By necessity, institutional film presents a vision of an idealized, universalized and, dare I say it, homogenized Mormon collective. Institutional film does not explore the paradoxes and deep-seated ambiguities of discipleship because it is designed to provide answers—not questions. This is where independent Mormon cinema is needed. Truly great cinema raises important questions about the human experience and allows the viewer to reach their own conclusions. Mormon cinema can similarly explore the multi-layered adversities of the Mormon experience. My sense is that a shift in focus to a multinational LDS audience will help facilitate this process.

Of course, the next issue to be considered is how such a seemingly monumental shift in independent Mormon cinema can be realized pragmatically. As far as production is concerned, I feel that it could be accomplished in part if LDS filmmakers from Utah could increase their exposure to the international LDS community in non-missionary and non-tourist settings. Since BYU tends to act as the central training grounds for nascent Mormon filmmakers, students could be encouraged by their mentors to study abroad and gather personal narratives from LDS

members in a folkloric or documentary fashion. These stories could later be adapted for the screen—or even be presented in their original documentary form.

Furthermore, there should be an effort to decentralize the production of LDS cinema. Ideally, members outside of Utah can begin to represent themselves if they can be given access to training and production equipment. This could be fostered by film exchange programs through BYU and other universities, starting with BYU-Hawaii which enrolls many church members from across the Pacific Rim. Through these programs, international church members would be able to tell their own unique narratives.

At the risk of going on a tangent, let me emphasize my belief that personal narratives should be a key source of inspiration for LDS cinema, especially a globally-oriented one. In a recent broadcast of KUER's *RadioWest*, LDS literary scholar Laura L. Bush stated:

Mormons are looking. . . to write the Great Mormon Novel or the Great Mormon Drama. I think they're overlooking the genre that is most organic to them: life-writing, autobiography, diary, and personal essay. They're brilliant at it and they're very practiced at it. . . . We're all about writing personal histories, family histories, and doing genealogy. That's what we're known about even by outsiders. So we have to look inward and see that this writing is not trivial.²⁰

Although Bush is referring to LDS literature, her comments could apply equally well to Mormon cinema. Too many Mormon filmmakers are content to merely mimic Hollywood's pre-packaged genres and conventions when they should be exploring and developing new aesthetics. We should begin fostering narratives that are much more organic to the LDS experience: non-fictional forms such as personal history. While we all roll our eyes at preachy LDS filmmaking (and for good reason), we should not be so quick to dismiss the possibility of recording the sincere, faith-building experiences of church members from across the globe. My sense is that a shift to strengthening the saints from within the church—as opposed to preaching to gospel outside the

church—could help to minimize the overly didactic and potentially manipulative elements of this kind of Mormon cinema.

Of course, production is only one element of the filmmaking process. When it comes to issues of distribution, exhibition, and marketing, Mormon cinema would unfortunately have to overcome some very large hurdles in order to get films to the international audience. I am doubtful that traditional distribution channels would be truly feasible for Mormon cinema because of the economic and legal complications involved in foreign exhibition. For example, it was recently brought to my attention that although there are 860,000 church members in Brazil, a large majority of those church-goers belong to the lower class, which means that they would be unable to afford the steep price of movie tickets. However, even Brazilians who live in abject poverty usually possess a television. Could television be used as an alternative method of distribution for Mormon films? These are the kind of questions which need to be addressed in order for a global LDS cinema to come to fruition. To confront these issues we need more than a legion of talented, globally-sensitive filmmakers—we need a band of intelligent and enterprising entrepreneurs to help us envision and pursue alternative methods of distribution, exhibition, and marketing.

It is not necessarily my intention to suggest that the church-owned schools are the panacea for Mormon cinema, but I believe that BYU could play an important role in fostering these business visionaries as well. One of the nation's top film schools, the University of Southern California, offers an MBA in entertainment business which is taught jointly by the School of Business and the School of Cinema-Television. Perhaps similar alliances could be formed between the Marriott School of Business and the Department of Theatre and Media Arts

at BYU. If the School of Business offered a concentration certificate, a few classes or even a symposium in entertainment business, it might initiate some important conversations about how to distribute films to LDS audiences abroad. One of the exciting aspects of the film industry is that it necessitates collaboration and cooperation with individuals from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. Several members of the church are well established in the business sector and Mormon cinema should begin to more fully utilize the strengths of these individuals if growth and progress is to be made.

As the LDS film movement begins to more fully utilize the strength of the global LDS community, Mormon cinema will become a “marvelous work and a wonder” (Isaiah 29:14). The future development and the continual progress of the LDS film movement does not depend upon bigger budgets, better production values or high-profile movie stars. Rather, it will be in the multilateral collaboration and the increased global unity of the international body of saints. For I continue to believe that it is “by small and simple means that great things are brought to pass” (Alma 37:6).

1. qtd. in *American Cinema: The Studio System*, directed by Alain Klarer (Image Entertainment, 1995).
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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

6. Jongiorgi Enos, "Why *Crossover* Is a Dirty Word," *Irreantum* 5.4 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004): 21-33.
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15. Douglas Gomery, "The Hollywood Studio System," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 45-48.
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17. Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment* (Tonbridge, England: Whitefriars Press, 1985): 45-50.
18. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 8.
19. Richard J. Maynes, "Keeping Our Covenants," *Ensign* 34.11 (November 2004): 92-94.
20. Laura L. Bush, interview by Doug Fabrizio, *RadioWest*, KUER, January 4, 2005.