Mormon Cinema on the Web

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Mormon cinema on the Internet is a moving target. Because change in this medium occurs so rapidly, the information presented in this review will necessarily become dated in a few months and much more so in the years to come. What I hope to provide, therefore, is a snapshot of online resources related to LDS or Mormon cinema near the beginning of their evolution. I believe that the Internet will become the next great force in both Mormon cinema and world cinema in general, if it has not already done so. Hence, while the current article may prove useful for contemporary readers by surveying online resources currently available, hopefully it will also be of interest to readers years from now by providing a glimpse back into one of the greatest, and newest, LDS art forms in its infancy.

At the present, websites devoted to Mormonism and motion pictures can be roughly divided into four categories:

1. Those that promote specific titles or production companies
2. Those that sell Mormon films on traditional video formats (primarily DVD)
3. Those that discuss or catalog Mormon films
4. Those that exhibit Mormon films online

The first two categories can be dealt with rather quickly.

Promotional Websites

Today standard practice throughout the motion picture industry is for any new film to have a dedicated website with trailers, cast and crew

biographies, release information, or other promotional material, and this is true of Mormon films as well. The first of these within Mormonism was the Zion Films website launched just before the release of *God's Army* in early 2000, and the practice will probably continue in perpetuity. One more recent example is the site for Christian Vuissa's film about sister missionaries in Austria, http://www.errandofangelsmovie.com.

In addition to specific films, there are sites for individual production and distribution companies, such as HaleStorm Entertainment at http://www .halestormentertainment.com, Excel Entertainment at http://www.excelfilms .com, Main Street Movie Company at http://mainstreetmovieco.com, and Lightstone Pictures at http://www.likenthescriptures.com. Straightforward commercial efforts, these corporate sites exist to promote their firms' brand of Mormon filmmaking and their individual titles.

Retail Websites

Some companies, such as HaleStorm and Lightstone, also sell their own DVDs directly to consumers on these sites. Similarly, the video recordings page on www.ldscatalog.com has an extensive selection of DVD and VHS titles, all produced by the Church and available at incredibly low prices; as with all Church materials, they are priced essentially at the cost of production. In contrast to such sites, general commercial retailers consistently offer a slightly broader range of inventory. Foremost among these are LDS booksellers such as Deseret Book at http://deseretbook.com and Seagull Book at http://www.seagullbook.com.

Far more interesting, however, are websites that have no corresponding physical stores and are dedicated exclusively to selling Mormon videos. The first and foremost of these was www.ldsvideostore.com, launched by an enterprising couple in Texas around 2001. This site, which featured a somewhat haphazard layout but a spectacular selection of VHS and DVD titles at excellent prices, is now sadly defunct, as are one or two others that arose in its wake. The modern-day equivalent is the much better organized MormonMedia.com (http://mormonmedia.com), which also features music and books at reasonable prices along with media news and discussion forums, although these do not appear to be heavily trafficked. In addition, progressing technology has given us an alternative that surely will increase in importance. The site LDSfilms2go (http://ldsfilms2go.com) offers a variety of feature-length films available for download for a fee. Depending on the films' distributors, they may be available in QuickTime or Windows Media formats, with prices at $5.99 or $10.99, respectively.

Many today may still be unfamiliar with the downloading of motion pictures as raw data without any corresponding physical video device, but such transactions are already becoming the method of choice for online use. Currently LDSfilms2go has no musical component, but the prospect of an LDS iTunes is impressive (and sites with musical mp3s such as http://latterdaysongs.com, http://www.ldstunesnow.com, and http://www.ldsmusiconline.com do exist). LDSfilms2go has the potential to allow for the proliferation of Mormon films of all shapes and varieties without the cost of creating or shipping physical DVDs. This would have at least two positive results: it would reduce overhead, increasing the profit margin for filmmakers, and it would create the equivalent of micropublishing within Mormon film—individual titles would not have to reach audiences as large as before to be successful. This would allow for greater variety within the corpus of Mormon cinema—short films, documentaries, abstract and experimental films, music videos, and all other varieties—all turning a small profit, giving some remuneration to their creators and, hence, motivating filmmakers to continue their craft. A site that combines the sale of videos with musical files, literature, artwork, sheet music, and other arts could radically restructure the production and consumption of Mormon art. In the meantime, innovative use of online distribution such as that at LDSfilms2go may even rekindle sales of traditional Mormon DVDs before taking their place and making them completely obsolete.

A more familiar model, based on rentals of physical video devices, is represented by the site LDSMovieRentals (http://ldsmovierentals.com). A Mormon version of Netflix, this site offers DVDs mailed to users' homes for a monthly fee—$12.95 for one DVD at a time, $19.95 for two at a time. Both plans offer unlimited rentals, no shipping or late fees, and other benefits common to online rental services. The selection is good, including some mainstream films that would be of interest to Mormon viewers, such as Big Idea's *VeggieTales* pictures. Even so, it is unclear if there is sufficient breadth within Mormon cinema and a large enough base of consumers who desire to receive their movies in this way to make the venture commercially viable. In any case, like LDSfilms2go, it represents another way in which the Internet is altering the landscape of Mormon film distribution.

Websites That Discuss LDS Films

Gideon Burton has frequently invoked Wayne Booth's evaluation of Mormon literature in his discussions of Mormon cinema: "We won't get a great artistic culture until we have a great critical culture."[1] In 1967, a few years before Booth made this remark, Elder Spencer W. Kimball of

the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated that soon Mormon-themed films would proliferate across the globe in every language and culture, "written by great artists, purified by the best critics."[2] I believe that this critical purification is necessary before Mormon films will reach the state of geographical ubiquity and aesthetic achievement that President Kimball envisioned. Criticism of Mormon films has existed in sporadic works such as memoirs and masters theses since the 1960s, but it is only in the past few years that we have seen a consistent effort to seriously evaluate Mormon films at festivals and symposia and within the pages of print journals like *Sunstone, Dialogue, BYU Studies,* and *Irreantum.* This effort is commendable and must continue, but at the same time the Internet is transforming film criticism, Mormon and otherwise. It is now mainly websites and blogs, rather than traditional print journals and academic symposia, that are the locus of discussions of Mormon films. Just as the Internet continues to revolutionize the distribution of LDS films, it has also completely altered the community that consumes and evaluates them. The most important way it has done this is simply in connecting consumers who would otherwise exist in a diaspora, unable to connect with each other or to support the films: there is now a uniform, universally accessible meeting place for people to discuss, read about, and evaluate Mormon motion pictures.[3]

As with much of what is on the Internet, a great deal of this material is created by fans and nonspecialists—the primary example being discussion groups maintained through sites such as Google and Yahoo—and as such it is vaguely interesting but not particularly edifying or educational. Even when mediated, such forums tend to push the bounds of civility and rarely approach nuanced analysis of any particular film. As two prominent mainstream film bloggers have said: "The problem with the participatory aspects of online discourse is that they often attract people who value conflict and argument above all else,"[4] and, "There are intelligent comments, but they're few and far between. It's mostly people who want to make themselves heard, even though they may have little worth saying."[5] Since such assessments are sadly true of Mormon film forums as well, I would like to focus here on the websites that are either the most popular or most valuable, holding them up to a standard of critical acuity that will help advance the art of Mormon cinema as evoked by President Kimball.

Before discussing other sites, I would like to mention the film portion of the Mormon Literature and Creative Arts Database (MLCAD), located at http://mormonlit.lib.byu.edu. I was involved in the development of this database and thus cannot review its content in depth, but the site is similar to the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com) but with fuller annotations and categorical classifications. While it does not feature news

of upcoming productions, streaming video, or lengthy theoretical discussions, it does provide the most complete compilation of Mormon films ever assembled, as of this writing comprising 4,427 titles. It is already arguably the greatest resource—online or not—for anyone wishing to study the breadth or history of Mormon-related films.

Long before the development of the MLCAD, however, came the first major website dedicated to LDS cinema, the aptly named Ldsfilm.com (http://www.ldsfilm.com). After the success of *God's Army*, Thomas Baggaley and Preston Hunter became enthused about the potential for Mormon film and decided to use the Internet to discuss and promote it. They launched Ldsfilm.com as an online gathering place for the geographically dispersed Mormon film community and set about creating resources in the form of web pages for nearly every component of the budding field. The duo showed incredible prescience by utilizing the Internet to promote Mormon cinema as a definable entity. Their work was responsible for the legitimizing of Mormon film's Fifth Wave,[6] particularly the era's theatrical feature films, to an extent to which they are generally not given credit. As its name implies, for years the site remained the only website dedicated to LDS film.

Today, however, the site shows its age, like an eight-year-old dinosaur from the Internet's ancient history. As the web constantly redesigned itself with the introduction of wikis, blogs, increasingly sophisticated searchability and design, and so forth, Baggaley and Hunter, unpaid enthusiasts who have done all their web work in addition to regular careers, have been unable to keep pace. Ldsfilm.com has been largely eclipsed by its children, a generation of younger websites like the MLCAD that cater to specific components of Mormon cinema with better and more up-to-date design. Despite this, the site is still arguably the most prominent website related to Mormon film, making it worthwhile to examine its merits and faults in greater detail.

The best thing about the site has already been mentioned: its timeliness in cohering a Mormon film community when the Fifth Wave was just forming. Beyond that, some of the best resources within Ldsfilm.com are the notices dealing with upcoming films. Baggaley and Hunter quickly established themselves as authorities in this area, and filmmakers also realized that sending a press release to Ldsfilm.com would reach a core audience better than other outlets. A few years ago, Carolyn Hart Bennett began overseeing all the site's information concerning upcoming films, and so while other resources have proliferated, Ldsfilm.com still remains the best quick resource to find out general information about forthcoming projects and their state of development.

The site also features biographical material on Mormon filmmakers past and present, primarily in a series of pages under the rubric Bios. These blurbs are listed alphabetically under occupation and generally feature accurate, if not always up-to-date, information. A request on the site's main page for autobiographical updates is essentially the best the webmasters can do in this regard, but another way to improve this information, particularly concerning contemporary filmmakers, would be to increase its scope to include all film-related positions and then make it searchable by occupation and location, with contact information.

Another main draw—perhaps the greatest—of Ldsfilm.com is the sheer amount of information it presents, from box office statistics to multitudinous prose essays. Ironically, however, its main drawback stems precisely from this excess of content, in that it makes the site incredibly difficult to navigate. Individual pages scroll on and on, oftentimes including different categories of information that should be accessed separately on individual pages. Thus, sought information can be nearly impossible to find, a problem compounded exponentially by the lack of a search field on the homepage.

The second major deficiency of Ldsfilm.com is a lack of critical standards, or at least their explicitness. The site is not refereed in any way, and it often seems haphazard in its checking of sources, its accuracy, and its consistency in applying criteria across multiple people and films. By the latter point, I mean that individual filmmakers may be profiled without any reference to why they are included while others with equivalent credentials are not. For instance, a Directors' Profiles page, different from the aforementioned Bios, discusses roughly thirty individuals, a narrowed list of talent that would be quite useful except that it is unclear how or why those thirty were selected. Alfred Hitchcock is present, presumably for the slight Mormon content in his film *Family Plot*, but Wetzel Whitaker, who directed over one hundred LDS productions—including very well known titles like *Man's Search for Happiness* and *Windows of Heaven*—is nowhere to be found.

There are also accuracy problems: the early Mormon film distributor and producer Lester Park is included as a director although he never directed a single film. The website also cites silent actor John Gilbert's biography and discusses some of his Mormon heritage, but then fails to state that Gilbert was never baptized and was therefore not LDS.

To summarize, perhaps Ldsfilm.com is too much of a good thing. Much of the information on the site is simply extraneous. I personally feel that it has now become a historical record, a glimpse into Mormon film studies in its infancy, and I would like to see the site maintained that way

for scholarship's sake. However, if the webmasters want to keep it relevant, including for students of current LDS cinema, a first step must be to purge the site of at least half its content. A decrease in the amount of information would make it easier to organize the remaining material in a coherent and searchable manner, and it could then be gradually augmented within the new streamlined framework.

As I indicated earlier, it is true that Ldsfilm.com has been largely responsible for the other critical websites that have grown up in its wake. The online Mormon lifestyle journal Meridian Magazine (http://www.meridianmagazine.com, edited by Maurine Proctor and published by her husband, Scot), for instance, added discussions of cinema to its material many years ago, with articles by a variety of authors including filmmaker Kieth Merrill and author/screenwriter Orson Scott Card. Meridian is exemplary for its work in applying Mormon thought to mainstream films—recent articles have discussed *The Dark Knight* and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*—but unfortunately, with its light tone and predictably effusive praise of Mormon-themed films, it generally consists of light fare that serves as advertising more than criticism. While this is consistent with the magazine's overall style, it lacks substance for the more thoughtful reader. Its archival searchability is also minimal. In contrast, where it excels is precisely in introducing new nonspecialist readers to the realm of Mormon film, preparing them to eventually consider more challenging and rewarding criticism.

Somewhat recently the group blog A Motley Vision (http://www.motleyvision.org, edited by William Morris), which is devoted to Mormon culture and literature, has taken up the cinematic gauntlet, serially and seriously addressing theoretical and aesthetic issues important to Mormon film. Like the Proctors, Morris has also utilized the efforts of many contributors, including regular film columnist Eric Thompson. Because of the assumed audience of writers, editors, academics, and literati, the work here has consistently been of a higher caliber than Meridian's. In late August 2008, for example, both sites featured reviews of *Errand of Angels* as their main stories. Meridian's article by Catherine Keddington Arveseth included valuable production information gleaned from a conversation with the filmmakers, but its greatest critical contribution was that the film was "absolutely believable and authentically touching."[7] A Motley Vision's review was written by William Morris's sister Katherine, also not a film specialist, but in addition to her praise for the film's realism and drama she also touched on the film's genricity within the canon of missionary films and the ways in which it evades mission sexism and many of the weightier

issues faced by female missionaries.[8] These are topics about which much remains to be written, but at least A Motley Vision began to raise them.

The Sunstone Education Foundation (http://www.sunstonemagazine .com), now under the guidance of Stephen R. Carter and Mary Ellen Robertson, has also used its strong online presence to address Mormon film through blogs and podcasts—particularly downloadable recordings of past Sunstone Symposia—beyond what it has been able to do in *Sunstone Magazine* itself. Also, the new Dialogue Paperless (at http://www.dialoguejournal.com); the Association for Mormon Letters (http://www.aml-online.org), particularly its online review archive; and Brigham Young University, including *BYU Studies* and its online reviews of which this article is a part, all stand poised to greatly contribute to the field of Mormon film studies.

Much of the best criticism, however, will come from—and indeed already does come from—informed and conscientious individual bloggers. Mentions of Mormon film are proliferating throughout the Bloggernacle (http://www.ldsblogs.org), but individuals outside that aegis are beginning a systematic study of the field. Today the best bloggers who consistently devote their work to Mormon cinema are Gideon Burton and Trevor Banks.

Burton, whom I have already mentioned, is a well-known leader in the field of Mormon letters. In the past decade, he has chosen to broaden his field of study from Mormon literature and rhetoric to include Mormon cinema as well. Consequently, he has been responsible for a great deal of material, including a special issue of *BYU Studies* devoted to Mormon film, the aforementioned MLCAD, and development of a course at BYU. (Full disclosure: I have been involved with several of these projects.) His blog (http://gideonburton.typepad.com) addresses topics he teaches for the university's English Department, such as rhetoric and English literature, as well as Mormon literature and film, but he comments on the latter frequently and incisively. For example, his coverage of the LDS Film Festival in January 2008, which came in a swift series of in-depth posts, was simultaneously broad and penetrating. Given his training in academia and his experience as an educator, the depth of Burton's analyses generally go far beyond those on any of the sites previously mentioned.

But it is the blog started by Trevor Banks, Toward an LDS Cinema (http://ldscinema.blogspot.com), that is easily the most perceptive, broadranging, and prolific discussion of Mormon film online today, as Burton himself acknowledges (it was, indeed, Burton who first alerted me to Banks's site). Banks, a Fulbright fellow in Lodz, Poland, took on two contributors in Benjamin Thevenin and Adam K. K. Figueira, who do most

of the posting now that Banks is in film school. They both have a broad knowledge of cinematic theory, history, and production, which shows in their writing. What Banks's blog lacks in timely reviews of recent films it makes up for in critical quality: some of the post titles listed under readers' favorites include "*Fight Club*: An LDS Reading," "*Liken the Scriptures*/Psychology in Film," and "Morality, Rambo, Brigham Young." The blog also excels in placing Mormon cinema within a global context, comparing it to international and avant-garde films rather than to populist American cinema alone; some posts mention filmmakers such as Bill Viola, Katsuhiro Otomo, Darren Aronofsky, Carl Dreyer, Andrei Tarkovsky, the Wachowski brothers, Krysztof Kieslowski, Phil Morrison, Yasujiro Ozu, Aki Kaurismaki, and others. Lest the posts seem too elitist, films like *Tomorrow Never Dies, WALL-E,* and *Transformers* are also discussed. The authors assume a degree of familiarity with global film culture and are thus free to immediately delve into advanced discussions that push the boundaries of Mormon film theory. Indeed, the site's greatest flaw is perhaps that it spends so much time on global cinema rather than in the thick of Mormon film proper.

As the blog's title indicates, Toward an LDS Cinema is reaching toward an understanding of Mormon film, positing it as a future entity toward which we're moving. This yearning makes it the online resource most committed to advancing Mormon cinematic arts through the purifying criticism President Kimball called for decades ago. The downside of such criticism is that the blog might at times be so infused with global cinema and film theory that it loses noncineaste readers unversed in these areas. More prosaic sites like Ldsfilm.com can therefore serve as a gateway toward the more serious criticism of Toward an LDS Cinema and other forthcoming sites that will eventually amplify its critical acumen.

A final word may be in order on the social and interactive nature of online criticism, blogs in particular. Because they are not edited, blogs have gained a reputation for both meandering writing and quickly composed posts, which can lead to either flaccid analysis (including overly exuberant praise) or, on the other hand, acerbic attacks, shot off in the heat of an impassioned moment. Such a perception is probably exaggerated, however. In well-composed blogs like Burton's and Banks's, not much is apt to be written off the cuff. Far more important than their amateur nature is their communal nature. Film blogs have received a great deal of attention for their dispersion and interactivity: they are instantly accessible to anyone throughout the globe and, through user comment sections, allow for lateral communication between online readers not possible with print journals. The concept of a group of film buffs gathering together is

certainly not new—note, for instance, the Surrealists in Madrid in the 1920s, the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics in Paris in the 1950s, and hordes of others in that city and New York through the 1970s. What the Internet adds to the equation is the ability to transcend geography and connect with like-minded people from any corner of the globe. This equates readers with authors in a way reminiscent of the Church's use of a lay clergy, enabling all to preach, edify, and rejoice together. Also, it coheres a global community that otherwise simply could not exist. This intellectual gathering, with participants in stakes scattered throughout the earth, is akin to the Church's nineteenth-century physical gathering. Church leaders often describe broadcast technology's unifying potential, but this power is greatly enhanced when communication flows in both directions.

That is not to say that the Web is an Edenic utopia of online commiseration. As non-Mormon film blogger Stephanie Zacharek stated: "The idea of the Web as a democratic, participatory medium is very grand, but the reality is a total mess."[9] While this is true, the occasional arguments, tangents, and red herrings should not distract from the Internet's immense potential as the Church grows throughout the earth. In contrast to Zacharek, Jonathan Rosenbaum, one of the most prominent film critics of our time, said: "Within my own experience, I would say that the 'participatory' aspects of film writing, including criticism and scholarship, *have* helped to create a new form of community, and I would further submit that those who consider this claim overblown probably haven't been participants or members of this community, except indirectly."[10]

The result of continued online criticism combined with an intelligent discussion from all concerned Latter-day Saints will be nothing less than the continued refinement of Mormon cinematic aesthetics. Returning to President Kimball, the criticism itself will be purified and, through the Internet, reach people in every corner of the globe, preparing the way for the films to follow.

Websites That Exhibit LDS Films

At present, there are more websites dedicated to discussing Mormon films than to showing them. Yet while an informed and accessible discussion of Mormon cinema is absolutely essential for Mormon film to mature, the arena in which it will do so will largely be online distribution. Like blogs and criticism but to an exponentially greater degree, the growth of viral video has enormous potential to link Latter-day Saints across geographical boundaries; to a great extent, it is through online films and videos that the Saints of tomorrow will commune with each other.

Christianity is the fastest growing religious movement in the world, and the LDS Church is near the cusp of this growth. Development in the Southern Hemisphere—Africa and Latin America—is particularly pronounced, and in coming years we can expect to see continued growth in developing nations, former Communist regimes, and other areas. Such places are not suitable markets for Mormon motion pictures like the theatrical features that have been released since *God's Army* or even most of the productions produced by the Church itself. The way to incorporate these areas into a global Mormon culture is through small-scale viral videos about common Church activities and regular rank-and-file Church members. Even better than just receiving such productions, Saints in these areas could cheaply produce their own films and send them to Church members elsewhere. In this way a worldwide cinematic web would develop, fostering deep concern and fellowship between Latter-day Saints who will never have the opportunity to meet in person. Of course, today many Latter-day Saints in developing nations cannot access the Internet to the extent possible elsewhere, but as the technology and accessibility increase, we must be prepared.

Musings about the democratization of cinema are not limited to Mormonism. Recently, the journal *Studies in Documentary Film* published a special issue about the aesthetics of viral video on YouTube and elsewhere.[11] A theme across several of the essays is that such videos represent a quick flow of two-way communication rather than polished works of art. Craig Hight describes them in this way:

> The explosion of [user-created material] reinforces a kind of "YouTube" aesthetic; amateur footage, edited on a desktop, intended almost as throwaway pieces of culture, often produced as a direct response to other online material. This kind of online environment provides for both the flowering of the work of new documentary auteurs, and also their swamping within an ocean of more mediocre offerings.[12]

Later, Bjorn Sorenssen compares modern online videos with Alexandre Astruc's concept of a camera-stylo from 1948, when 16mm film and television were presenting new opportunities for the avant-garde. With these technologies and the bright future presented France at the end of World War II, Astruc envisioned a breakthrough for film as a medium, no longer only as strict entertainment but also as a fundamental tool for human communication. As he said:

> With the development of 16mm and television, the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector, will go to the local bookstore and hire films written on any subject, of any form, from literary criticism and novels to mathematics, history, and general science. From that moment

on, it will no longer be possible to speak of the cinema. There will be several cinemas just as today there are several literatures, for the cinema, like literature, is not so much a particular art as a language which can express any sphere of thought.[13]

Sorenssen draws the following conclusions from Astruc's essay that are applicable to Mormon film today: (1) New technology provides new means of expression. With each advance in motion picture technology, it changes "from being exclusive and privileged to a common and publicly available form of expression"; think of video blogging via modern webcams. (2) "This, in turn, opens space for a more democratic use of the medium. (3) It also opens up new possibilities for modern (contemporary) and different forms and usages."[14]

Compare the democratic prospect of the camera-stylo with the following sentiment of John Grierson, the man who coined the word "documentary" and helped advance its form as much as anyone else in history, years after Astruc wrote his article. He stated that Cesare Zavattini, a prominent neorealist filmmaker,

> thought it would be wonderful if all the villages in Italy were armed with cameras so that they could make films by themselves and write film letters to each other, and it was all supposed to be a great joke. I was the person who didn't laugh, because I think that is the next stage . . . the local film people making films to state their case politically or otherwise, to express themselves whether it's in journalistic or other terms.[15]

Such a situation is exactly what the Internet has now enabled. Within Mormonism it is now possible to create a proliferation of short and cheap videos—fiction, documentary, and experimental—in conversation with each other throughout the globe. A few sites are already in place to support this dialogue.

The website best positioned to create this revolution in Mormon filmmaking is MormonWebTV (http://www.mormonwebtv.com). This site, administered by Kent Olmstead in Phoenix, Arizona, has, over the past few years, established itself as a Mormon version of YouTube. The similarity is more than passing, in fact, for the site operates by linking to videos already hosted by YouTube, thus allowing Olmstead to avoid duplicating a preexisting service and save valuable server space. The fact that MormonWebTV so closely resembles YouTube is not to its discredit; rather, it represents an innovative use of the larger site, winnowing down its immense material to create a clearinghouse for the Mormon niche audience. Where this could eventually become a liability is when it runs aground of YouTube's ten-minute limit on video length; in the near future it would be

desirable for MormonWebTV to offer pictures of twenty minutes, thirty minutes, or longer.

MormonWebTV features a well-designed simple interface and is at present fairly easy to navigate. As of this writing it features 357 videos, which can be accessed through a complete list (unfortunately not alphabetized) or seven subject headings such as humor, music, and missionary; one category devoted to theatrical films, primarily trailers, unfortunately uses the name "Mormon Cinema," thus perpetuating the myth begun by Ldsfilm.com that Mormon cinema consists exclusively of films released in theaters, when in reality every video on the site constitutes a part of the corpus. In addition to these categories, three helpful fields on the main page list eleven videos under the title "Featured Videos"; seventeen under "Newest Videos," perhaps the most useful group; and fifteen more under "Popular." How featured and popular videos differ is not specified. All of these menus make it possible to quickly find most types of videos desired, but in the future as the number of videos surges beyond 357, a search field will be absolutely essential.

On my visits to the site, I have found no great art and many pieces that bordered on the insipid (for example, the featured video in mid-September was a still image of conservative radio host Michael Medved with a recording of an inane conversation he had with an excommunicated Mormon paranoiac—or prankster). There was also some abuse in the posting of videos—particularly a series about putting inappropriate objects in blenders—with no relation to Mormonism. But among the detritus there is always something to engage, and viewers must remember that viral video does not as yet lend itself to high-end productions. In addition to the aforementioned promotional material for theatrical films, the two main categories of video seem to be comedies or spoofs and documentaries or nonfiction pieces. The former are not merely parodies, although one can find Mormon send-ups of *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Spiderman, The Princess Bride*, *The Brady Bunch, Extreme Makeover,* and even a Pepsi commercial. Mormon-themed pictures are also fair game, whether they're real— *Saturday's Warrior*—or imaginary—*The Visiting Teaching Movie* and *The Best Three Years.* There are riffs on other aspects of Mormon culture such as missionary training, Mormon dress and grooming, home teaching, families, and Deseret Industries. Some videos approach these topics from a very oblique angle: one of the most popular, with 3,371 hits at present, is *Ask a Mormon Ninja*, a well-made spot in which, as expected, a Mormon ninja comments on ninja skills, martial arts-enhanced missionary work, ninja sacrament meeting, and other aspects of Mormon ninja life. This is one of the freshest and most engaging videos on the site, although it could

benefit by losing at least sixty seconds. Two others particularly worth viewing are the superhero missionary spoof *Shoes the Right* (in Spanish) and the *Star Wars* send up *CTR Wars*, although both are a little rough around the edges. Undoubtedly MormonWebTV's greatest undiscovered gems are the two Lego Book of Mormon animations, one with German intertitles and one with spoken English. These are inexplicably classified as instructional videos, though the strawberry jam spurting from Laban's plastic torso is a far cry from the traditional seminary video. Indeed, in my opinion the greatest moment in recent Mormon film history is a Lego Ammon dismembering his Lamanite foes to the strains of John Williams's pounding *The Phantom Menace* score.

The site's nonfiction videos range from professional spots produced by the Church itself, such as a short piece about humanitarian aid sent to Myanmar in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, to amateur vodcasts of a single individual simply talking to his own personal webcam. Within this broad range of material, some pieces fall short while others reach a level of thematic accomplishment despite their lack of technical sophistication; in this way, these unpolished films are like the quick cinematic missives envisioned by Astruc and Grierson, a notebook sketch rather than a finished portrait. One engaging piece, for instance, entitled *Road Trip to General Conference*, uses still images and audio to recount the journey of a group of girls from California to Salt Lake City in order to be present as Thomas S. Monson is sustained President of the Church. The film, which runs just over four minutes and is labeled as a rough cut, has as much to do with the conference crowds and the girls' social interactions—including a Latin dancing excursion—as it does with the conference sessions themselves. Even though no well-defined portraits emerge, we are given a glimpse into the girls' discipleship through their desire to be present for a historic occasion. Also worth viewing are video tributes to President and Sister Hinckley, photographic tours of multiple temples throughout the world, and historical items on a variety of subjects. These range from *Priesthood Revelation Anniversary,* a professional-quality production on black Latter-day Saints and the 1978 revelation on the priesthood that includes sit-down interviews and archival visuals, to *Carthage Jail Walkthrough*, a single handheld shot in which a tourist walks through the place of Joseph Smith's martyrdom. The effect of this piece is slightly unstable and frenetic—the cameraman goes too fast—but surprisingly sincere. Though more nonfiction films will add to the site's appeal, what is most missed at present is a separate category for documentaries.

MormonWebTV features many films that are neither documentaries, comedies, nor promotional material for larger films. These include

excerpts from television programs, ranging from conservative Mormon political pundit Glenn Beck to an Australian comedy show that apparently frequently invokes Mormonism for laughs. There is also a smattering of institutional Church films like *Faith in Every Footstep* (1997); my favorite among these is the *Homefront Jr.* spot "Who Broke My Window?" which I memorized as a child in the 1980s.

The inclusion of these films indicates one way in which Mormon-WebTV or another similar site could expand: by creating an online Mormon cinémathèque, a video equivalent of the MLCAD that streams video of all extant institutional Church films from the 1910s to today. Due to copyright, such an undertaking would best be undertaken by the Church Audiovisual Department itself. Although nothing of this magnitude is apparently on the horizon as yet, the Church is beginning to provide online video through various outlets.

The first and most important of these is the website of BYU Broadcasting (http://www.byub.org) and particularly its premiere satellite and cable station BYUTV (http://www.byutv.org). On this site, viewers may watch streaming video of the station's live broadcast by clicking on the "Tune in Now" link near the top left corner of the main page. First-time users are required to register, and return users will still have to click through a few pages (the destination site's address is http://www.byu.tv) and perhaps download a new media player to get to the video, but overall accessing video is quick and intuitive. Once video, which can be enlarged to full screen, is streaming, viewers can navigate back to the beginning of the program but not forward to the end. A broadcast schedule is available in the lower portion of the screen, and it is through this feature that additional programs (that have already aired) can be accessed. This design gives a good degree of searchability, although it would be nice if viewers could search alphabetically at any time and access any program that has ever aired on BYUTV.

BYU Broadcasting rightly sees satellite, cable, and Internet distribution as the heart of its future and the most effective way it can bring the university community and mission of the Church to the world. BYUTV has expanded its broadcast range immensely since its January 2000 launch, but through the Internet it is already available worldwide. A few years ago, video downloads of BYUTV in China were triple those in the United States,[16] for instance, and such figures can only be expected to increase.

The Church's main website LDS.org (http://www.lds.org) is not so obviously imbued with cinematic content, nor should it be. But the Church has definitely revolutionized its use of the Internet within the past five years, and high quality video content is therefore scattered throughout

the Church's sites. For instance, LDS.org's Broadcast page (http://www
.lds.org/broadcast, available by clicking on "Gospel Library—General Con-
ference" on the main page and then "Broadcasts" on the subsequent page)
contains links to BYUTV and BYU Radio Network, audio files of the com-
plete standard works, and links to videos like President Hinckley's address
to the National Press Club. These are all available in a column to the left of
the Broadcast page, while links in the center provide access to audio and
video files of general conferences, CES firesides, Christmas devotionals,
and other meetings. The oldest of these is the general conference of April
1997, though I suspect more sessions will eventually be added.

The Church's relatively new website Mormon.org (http://www.
mormon.org), designed as an interface for those curious about the Church's
basic beliefs, does not require as much navigation to access video content.
The center of the homepage—indeed essentially the entire page—features
a still headshot accompanied by querying taglines ("What is the purpose
of my life?" "Does God really know me?") along with a play-button link
to start a video. After two introductory videos, a link invites, "You too
can find answers to these questions." A page loads with a list of videos of
individuals delivering an impromptu monologue under two minutes in
length. These films represent a quantum leap forward in Church adver-
tising. At the end of each video, brief biographical information of the
speaker, including baptism date, is given in voice-over with B-roll action
footage of him or her; this is designed to illustrate that these are real people
speaking in their own words about their actual thoughts and experiences.
Compare this with the Church's videos of two decades ago, when fictitious
characters in films like *What Is Real?* (1990), *Together Forever* (1987), and
Our Heavenly Father's Plan (1986) gave similar testimonies but in totally
scripted and therefore artificial ways. By allowing real Church members to
simply tell their stories and bear their testimonies, today's spots, while still
promotional, have stripped away virtually all of the artifice and therefore
evince a much greater respect for viewers' intelligence and agency. The
result can only be salubrious.

Since launching Mormon.org, the Church has supplemented it with
an additional site entitled Jesus Christ, The Son of God (http://www.
jesuschrist.lds.org). This site has an extremely easy-to-find Multimedia
page that features Church films and presentations: *Special Witnesses of
Christ, The Restoration, The Bread of Life, Finding Faith in Christ*, the 2007
First Presidency Christmas Devotional, and, the most recent addition,
"The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent," a two-minute
excerpt of a general conference address by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. Some
of these are the longest Mormon films available online.

These sites represent different approaches the Church is using to update its multimedia presence, something that has become a particular emphasis of Elder M. Russell Ballard, who heads the Church Public Affairs department. In this capacity, Elder Ballard has spearheaded the Church's efforts to establish a media and online presence, and mainstream sites like YouTube have not escaped his attention. To counter the barrage of anti-Mormon videos available on YouTube, the Church itself has now posted a number of short films, including a series of specially made short interviews with Elder Ballard answering questions—sometimes basic, sometimes challenging—about the Church. For example, "How Do Mormon Beliefs Differ from Other Christians?" can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZGY_uSuH_g&feature=related; and "Is There Scientific Proof Authenticating the Book of Mormon?" is at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AQTr9oB8lw&feature=related. Together these two videos have had over 38,000 views, not a large number by YouTube standards but not inconsequential either. These efforts represent an innovative and rather technologically savvy way for the Church to promote itself. Recognizing that the Church as an institution can only have so much sway in a democratized (and skeptical) media environment, Elder Ballard has also called on Church members to use blogs, online video, and other technologies to make their individual voices heard (his request to do so, given in a commencement address at BYU–Hawaii on December 15, 2007, can be seen on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEsjYm6Av4w; full text of the address is available at http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/using-new-media-to-support-the-work-of-the-church). Young Church members have responded en masse, and their online contributions represent the same unscripted authenticity as the Church's new advertisements but to a degree completely unattainable by the Church Audiovisual and Public Affairs departments.

The best of these resources predates Elder Ballard's advocacy by several years. One of the most exciting developments in recent Mormon film history is the development of the Fit for the Kingdom project, and the Internet has been central to its growth. This movement began around 2000 as a proposal for a series of short films for traditional broadcast by BYU Broadcasting. When this was rejected, the filmmakers—led by BYU film professor Dean Duncan and then-student Ben Unguren (now on the faculty)—turned to the Internet (http://fitforthekingdom.byu.edu), which in fact proved to be a much better venue. At present there are twenty films available for online viewing, most lasting between three and ten minutes. They are documentaries, each profiling a single Church member or common Mormon activity such as scripture study or girls' camp. They

eschew traditional narrative structures and extraneous formal elements like a musical score in hopes that by focusing on the deceptively simple discipleship of ordinary Latter-day Saints they can reveal something extraordinary about discipleship and spirituality. To that end the Fit for the Kingdom films are the premiere example of a group of productions gathered together in a single website around an individual theme. This can set the precedent for future sites built around Church history, Latter-day Saints of shared ethnic backgrounds, or the Church in specific geographical areas. At present, the Fit for the Kingdom site features some of the best Mormon filmmaking of the past eight years as well as supplementary printed material designed to encourage new filmmakers to contribute productions. The webmasters retain the right to post or not post any submitted film, but this caveat, obviously ubiquitous in the broadcasting industry, is accompanied by an offer to assist in any stage of production or postproduction; recently the group received, helped revise, and posted its first film from a contributor who was previously unconnected to the movement, indicating that the films are beginning to gain recognition throughout the Church. Fit for the Kingdom thus displays the group mentality and interactivity of MormonWebTV but with a critical purpose and vetting procedure that consistently yields productions of a much higher quality than on that site.[17]

Beyond this, there are numerous other websites and blogs that contain a scattering of Mormon-themed videos. The best of these is the blog LDS & Mormon Videos (http://mormonvideos.blogspot.com), maintained by an anonymous blogger evidently in Provo. The site, which has been active since April 2008, does not offer criticism but instead links to "the best and most accurate videos about Mormons . . . from Youtube." Although such an endeavor duplicates much of the content of MormonWebTV, it does so in a format that is different enough to make itself viable. Each post features one video, often with a brief introduction geared toward non-Mormons, with nothing else. This makes for a much simpler and quieter interface than MormonWebTV's, which can seem somewhat busy with its myriad of videos and categories. LDS & Mormon Videos, by contrast, allows users to search through its subject tags, like those of any blog, but its draw is to discover what one person deems particularly interesting at any given time. With fifty-two postings in the past year, LDS & Mormon Videos has the potential to become a rival of MormonWebTV but with a much different purpose and ambience.

The site Entertainment4lds (http://www.entertainment4lds.com) serves as a hub for Mormon media-related websites, including many already discussed here. It therefore serves as a gateway to online film

rentals, video stores, and other traditional outlets, but it also features a listing of favorite Mormon YouTube videos.

Many sites contain videos geared to one particular theme. Blacklds.org (http://www.blacklds.org) has an excellent Video page that features content about AfricanAmerican Latter-day Saints. Similarly, the Church's Genesis Group for AfricanAmericans (http://www.ldsgenesisgroup.org) has a Media Presentations page that currently includes speeches from the 2006 Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society conference in Salt Lake City. Individual Church units are beginning to post their own videos as well. In my own stake in New York City, the stake history committee recently uploaded two videos by a non-Mormon journalist about the history of the Church in Harlem (the committee's website is http://www.nycldshistory.com; the videos are at http://www.nycldshistory.com/nycldshist/index.php?title=Harlem). One can even find videos in the online Mormon dating service LDSPlanet.com (http://www.ldsplanet.com), where users can create their own video profile and view the profiles of others. The list of pertinent sites, obviously, goes on and on.

Finally, in addition to sites maintained by Latter-day Saints, there are mainstream websites, primarily YouTube (http://www.youtube.com), that happen to have numerous videos with Mormon content (including, by default, every video also included at MormonWebTV). A YouTube search for Mormon-related keywords is a risky but rewarding business, as it generally turns up mountains of material divisible into three categories: First, there are all the accumulated anti-Mormon films and videos from the 1980s forward, much of which is quaint but some of which is genuinely offensive. Second, there are now a large number of blasé vodcasts about Mormons and politics or Mormon beliefs or other topics. These videos, which are generally directed to those outside the Church, are not always the most engaging for Latter-day Saints themselves, but the written comments underneath can be interesting, particularly as irate viewers spar with the video's creator over the merits of Mormon theology. Third and most important, there are many videos that are both positive in their outlook on the Church and interesting in their content as well. Many of these are also hosted on MormonWebTV, but enough are not that YouTube remains a profitable place to search for new Mormon web content. If that does not satisfy the true Mormon cineaste, a Google search of the term "Mormon videos" returns 1,910,000 hits.

In summary, there is an incredible amount of material on the Internet relating to Mormonism and motion pictures. The Internet is revolutionizing how films are discussed, consumed, and even created. Mormon filmmakers and critics can take advantage of this sea change by understanding

the strengths of viral video and group film criticism, thus allowing these two areas to nurture each other. As President Kimball implied, a great critical tradition will create a great cinematic tradition, which will in turn further inform good criticism. Through the Internet, isolated Latter-day Saints throughout the world can then connect and commune with each other. Such quickly executed productions can transform the video camera into a camera-stylo and the productions into film letters between Latter-day Saints. This will not only fulfill the visions of President Kimball, John Grierson, and Alexandre Astruc, but also, to a degree, of all the prophets who have foreseen the Saints of the Church of God spread upon the whole earth, establishing interconnected stakes of Zion, strengthened through their unity.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not a film studio or a cinema club, but we must realize that to a great extent it will be through the creation and consumption of amateur online video that the Saints in Bangkok, Medellin, Lagos, Kiev, Reykjavik, and New York City will be able to stand united in Zion, mourning with those that mourn, comforting those that stand in need of comfort, and standing as witnesses of God at all times, in all things, and in *all places*. At that time, it will not seem unfitting to pay tribute to those who pioneered the way for Mormon cinema to grow, mature, and flourish on the Web.

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1. Wayne C. Booth, "Question/Answer Session," *Letters to Smoother, etc. . . . : Proceedings of the 1980 BYU Symposium on the Humanities*, ed. Joy C. Ross and Steven C. Walker (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1981), 32. Burton quotes this, for instance, in his introduction to a special issue of *BYU Studies* devoted to Mormon film: Gideon Burton, "Establishing Shot: The Scope of Mormon Cinema," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007): 11.

2. Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," in John W. Welch and Don E. Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies Monographs, 1996), 61.

3. The shifting arena of Mormon film criticism mirrors that of film criticism in general. The most lucent recent discussion of this seismic shift is the series of articles grouped under the title "Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet: A Critical Symposium," *Cineaste* 33 (Fall 2008): 30–45, available online at

http://www.cineaste.com/articles/film-criticism-in-the-age-of-the-internet.htm. Anyone interested in evaluating Mormon film criticism online should begin here and should also be aware of a similar symposium, "Critics on Critics," that was published by *Sight and Sound* a few weeks later, available at http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49480.

4. Steve Erickson, in "Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet," 32.

5. Stephanie Zacharek, in "Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet," 45.

6. This term derives from a five-wave pattern I have proposed elsewhere to structure the history of Mormon film from 1905 to the present. The Fifth Wave began with the release of *God's Army* on March 10, 2000. See Randy Astle with Gideon Burton, "A History of Mormon Cinema," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007), 12–163.

7. Catherine Keddington Arveseth, "The Errand of Angels Soars," http://www.meridianmagazine.com/arts/080822errand.html.

8. Katherine Morris, "My Sister Katherine's Review of 'The Errand of Angels,'" http://www.motleyvision.org/?p=493#more-493.

9. Zacharek, in "Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet," 45.

10. Jonathan Rosenbaum, in "Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet," 40.

11. *Studies in Documentary Film* 2, no. 1 (2008).

12. Craig Hight, "The Field of Digital Documentary: A Challenge to Documentary Theorists," *Studies in Documentary Film* 2, no. 1 (2008): 5–6.

13. Alexandre Astruc, quoted in Bjorn Sorenssen, "Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc's *Caméra-stylo:* The New Avant-Garde in Documentary Realized?" *Studies in Documentary Film* 2, no. 1 (2008): 47.

14. Sorenssen, "Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc's Caméra-stylo," 49.

15. Elizabeth Sussez, "Grierson on Documentary: The Last Interview," *Film Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1972): 30. This quotation was also included in Ben Unguren, "A Video Postcard from New York," *Irreantum: A Review of Mormon Literature and Film* 8, no. 2 (2006): 206; this is a review of the Mormon documentary *Sisterz in Zion*, although it equally describes Unguren's work with the Fit for the Kingdom films, which I describe later in this article.

16. John Reim, personal conversation with author, January 15, 2006, cited in Astle and Burton, "History of Mormon Cinema," 153.

17. I have written an extended review of the longest Fit for the Kingdom film, *Angie* (2006), available via BYU Studies Review at http://byustudies.byu.edu/reviews/pages/reviewdetail.aspx?reviewID=462.