



An iconic still from the Church's 1993 epic *Legacy*, arguably the most prestigious Mormon film of the 1990s. *Legacy* is also emblematic of the Fourth Wave, as films, particularly within the Church, became larger in terms of production scale and narrative scope. The film's star, Kathleen Beller, is seen carrying a child at the front of the procession. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

## THE FOURTH WAVE:

### THE MASS MEDIA ERA (1974–2000)

The Fourth Wave deserves to be known as the Mass Media Era for at least three reasons. First, it was the first period dominated by video technology and various *media* besides traditional film; though I shall continue to use the term *filmmaking*, the majority of productions were now distributed electronically, even if they did not originate that way. Second, because of electronic distribution and the inexpensiveness and ubiquity of video, this era was marked by an incredibly wide dissemination of film compared with previous eras. Television, VHS, and satellite broadcasts revolutionized distribution by making obsolete the exhibition of an individual reel of film to a physically unified audience; now media was disseminated en masse to geographically isolated individuals. Third, not only did the amount of production mushroom, but often individual films were massive, particularly within the Church, making the Fourth Wave also the age of the LDS epic.

## INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH PRODUCTIONS

### Spencer W. Kimball: Lengthening the Church's Audiovisual Stride

It is instructive to note that this period began simultaneously with the presidency of Spencer W. Kimball. Though less involved in filmmaking than Presidents Grant, McKay, or, later, Hinckley, President Kimball created an atmosphere that profoundly reshaped the course of Church audiovisual productions. Virtually the first major discourse Kimball delivered as president was “When the World Will Be Converted,” given to the Church’s regional representatives at the April 1974 general conference. He spoke at length about the potential of electronic broadcasting as a proselytizing medium capable of reaching “the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8), emphasizing technologies like radio transistors and satellites. This discourse not only established a missionary zeal for his entire administration, but also embodied—and galvanized—the mass-media nature of the Fourth Wave. From this point on, Church media was expected to span the globe in proclaiming the gospel in every language.<sup>99</sup>

The Church implemented President Kimball’s vision through a variety of means. One that has not often been associated with cinema is the

### Key Films of the Fourth Wave

- *Cipher in the Snow* (1974, USA, director Keith Atkinson, 23 minutes). One of BYU's best-known educational films, this helped mark the transition from the Third to the Fourth Wave.
- *Homefront* spots (began in 1972, USA, many directors, beginning with Stan Ferguson, about 30 seconds each). This long-running public service announcement series by Bonneville Communications is among the Church's best-known and most-awarded works.
- *The First Vision* (1976, USA, director David Jacobs, 14 minutes). This classic film on young Joseph Smith was the first Church production not made for a specific organization or auxiliary.
- *Brigham* (1977, USA, director Thomas McGown, 132 minutes). This biopic of Brigham Young marks the return of the theatrically produced feature film by, for, and about Mormons.
- *The Mouths of Babes* (1980, USA, director T. C. Christensen, 15 minutes). This humorous film showing interviews of LDS children is a milestone in Mormon documentary and children's films.
- *Joseph Smith: The Man* (1980, USA, director T. C. Christensen, 10 minutes). A fiction-documentary hybrid that many consider marks an aesthetic and spiritual milestone in Mormon film.
- *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* (1980, USA, director Kieth Merrill, 26 minutes). This Christmas film starring James Stewart marks a high point in the Church's efforts to reach a broad audience.
- *The Godmakers* (1983, USA, director Ed Decker, 58 minutes). Arguably the most famous anti-Mormon documentary ever, emblematic of the Fourth Wave in its video-based distribution.
- *Perilous Journey* (1984, USA, director John Linton, 99 minutes). This independent Mormon-made feature film is an earnest alternative to many more recent offerings.

- *The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley* (1985, USA, director Brian Capener, 60 minutes). This biographical film on LDS scholar Hugh Nibley marks a high point in institutional documentary productions.
- *How Rare a Possession: The Book of Mormon* (1987, USA, director Russell Holt, 64 minutes). This well-produced film with several thematically linked storylines fully inaugurated the age of the institutional epic.
- *Together Forever* (1988, USA, director Michael McLean, 30 minutes). This short pseudodocumentary is arguably the Church's most important proselytizing film since *Man's Search for Happiness*.
- *A More Perfect Union: America Becomes a Nation* (1989, USA, director Peter Johnson, 112 minutes). The longest film ever produced by a Church entity, this represents the pinnacle of secular/educational productions at BYU.
- *The Lamb of God* (1993, USA, director Russell Holt, 27 minutes). Arguably the Church's most lavish biblical production, which has been extensively disseminated and repurposed.
- *The Mountain of the Lord* (1993, USA, director Peter Johnson, 72 minutes). Epic film created in honor of the centennial of the Salt Lake Temple.
- *Legacy* (1993, USA, director Kieth Merrill, 52 minutes). Perhaps the best-known film of the Fourth Wave, this pioneer epic inaugurated film screenings in the remodeled Joseph Smith Memorial Building. The building's auditorium—the Legacy Theater—now bears the film's name.
- *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000, USA, director Kieth Merrill, 67 minutes). This immense Book of Mormon epic followed *Legacy* as the Church's prestige production for screening at Temple Square.

spread of LDS visitors' centers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These had long existed, but under Kimball's administration they became a prime venue for film exhibition, expanding in step with the new temples being constructed across the United States and the world. For instance, those curious enough to stop at the new LDS temples going up along the beltway in Washington, D.C., or in the center of Mexico City were guided through an adjacent visitors' center featuring one or more film presentations.

In the late 1970s, the Church installed an in-house nonbroadcasting electronic production system in the Church Office Building. This system included nine translation booths and video equipment that could be connected to the auditorium, a conference room, and other areas of the building. The equipment was used for seminars held in the auditorium, including those for mission presidents and regional representatives; other uses included the recording of video materials for the Church's deaf membership and audio materials for the blind.<sup>100</sup>

Experiments with other electronic transmissions followed: portions of the October 1979 general conference were sent, delayed, to various receptors in Europe, and in April 1980 the process was reversed as Kimball and Gordon B. Hinckley spoke via satellite from upstate New York to the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. A year and a half later the Church began creating its own satellite system; a fireside on December 5, 1982, inaugurated the completed 500-building system. General conferences, firesides, film premieres, training meetings, and even sporting events have been broadcast in this way, with ever-increasing scope. In the late 1980s and 1990s, for instance, a series of "open house" film premieres were broadcast via the satellite network, each hosted by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—an adaptation of the classic cottage meeting to the mass-media era.

If satellites allowed the Church to send visual material on the largest scale yet, then VHS was its complement. Around 1975 the Church began to gradually replace its ubiquitous 16mm projectors with televisions and VCRs. Any grassroots efforts became official on November 13, 1982, when the First Presidency issued a letter urging local units to convert from 16mm to a video recorder and television set. The Church would cover 50 percent of the cost.<sup>101</sup> After this the changeover was quick and complete.

### **Jesse Stay and the Educational Film**

Jesse E. Stay directed the BYU studio from Whitaker's retirement in 1974 until 1983, a period that in retrospect is perhaps best defined by the dominance of secular educational films. Their increased prominence came

from many factors, perhaps most importantly the rise of bureaucracy within the structure of the Church and the implementation of Correlation to coordinate curriculum across the Church's many auxiliaries. The increased time required to move a religious project through multiple levels of authorization meant that many films were dated or obsolete by the time they were released. Educational films were not subject to such delays or to the effects of dozens of untrained hands stirring the pot and thus became faster to produce and, often, of higher quality when finished.<sup>102</sup> This trend was already evident with *Cipher in the Snow*, a cautionary tale completed under Whitaker in the spring of 1974, and a list of the era's best-known titles illustrates the strength of the educational film's position: *John Baker's Last Race* (1976), about a dying track star's efforts with a girls' track team; *The Gift* (1977), about a boy who does the farm chores as a Christmas present to his father; *The Mailbox* (1977), in which an elderly widow pines for contact with her distant children; *The Phone Call* (1978), which comedically contrasts a young man's shyness with one girl with his easily developing friendship with another; *Uncle Ben* (1978), about an alcoholic who reforms to care for his sister's children; and *The Emmett Smith Story* (1979), about a runner overcoming a physical disability and inspiring a student to do the same. Though Stay described such films as "filler"<sup>103</sup> as compared to more important religious productions, they represent some of the best-known productions in the studio's history.

Of course, the BYU studio was not without its religious films. Foremost among these was *The First Vision*, directed by David Jacobs for an August 1976 release. A fifteen-minute account of Joseph Smith's 1820 vision of the Father and Son, this was the first religious BYU film not commissioned by a single Church department; it also surpassed *Man's Search for Happiness* as the studio's most popular film. In addition to Judge Whitaker's ongoing *The Church in Action* series, there were several important films. Of these, *Where Jesus Walked*, a 1976 documentary contrasting the modern Holy Land with scriptural descriptions of Jesus' life, deserves particular mention. Scott Whitaker, the director, nurtured the project with a tenacity and vision greater than for any of his previous works, even during the remote production when severe back pains limited his mobility. Before the filming was complete, his health forced him to return home, and Bob Stum directed the remaining footage. Scott Whitaker was diagnosed with bone cancer and passed away a few weeks later, having never retired. The film was dedicated to his memory.



For *The First Vision* (1976), a camera dolly was set up to follow young Joseph Smith (Stewart Petersen) into the Sacred Grove. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

### **Peter Johnson and the Institutional Feature Film**

The BYU Motion Picture Studio films in the late 1970s generally suffered from a lack of distribution as the transition to video was underway. And the studio itself suffered from a lack of growth and professionalism. The reasons were numerous, but one significant factor was the rise of Bonneville and its command of Church productions. This meant fewer projects for the BYU studio, resulting in reduced revenues. The diminished financial resources did not allow for new hires or for upgrading equipment, and thus, at a time when the mainstream industry was undergoing rapid technical and technological change, the BYU studio and its personnel became quickly outdated.

When Stay retired on September 1, 1983, he was replaced by Peter N. Johnson. Johnson had been working in the film industry in Los Angeles when BYU invited him to reorganize and direct its academic film program. He spent the next eighteen months setting up an essentially new program. Soon after the university approved the curriculum he was asked to also take over as head of the studio. Johnson's commitment to the



academic program helped define a new direction for the studio as well. One of the challenges in creating a strong academic program for the students, Johnson explained, “was the fact that there were not many available LDS instructors with strong industry experience or credentials who were in a career position to move to Provo and teach.”<sup>104</sup> For a school like UCLA, this was not a problem because many of its film instructors were working professionals who were living in the same community. While this wasn’t possible at BYU, Johnson did see, with the studio, an opportunity to create a strong program for the students. The core of that program was to involve them, as much as their schedules would allow, in internship positions working on films the studio produced.

A three-pronged approach resulted: (1) Give the students a great curriculum and excellent instructors to teach the theory and some skill in filmmaking. (2) Give them firsthand experience working in a professionally operated motion picture studio, working side-by-side with the staff. (3) Bring in outside industry professionals, arrange for the studio’s direct involvement in the production of their projects, and have students work on those projects. This approach would allow the students to graduate from the university with an academic degree, a résumé listing legitimate industry experience, and critically important contacts with practicing professionals in the larger industry.

“The philosophy behind the operation of the studio,” Johnson explained, “was that we should strive in every way to achieve excellence in our productions.”<sup>105</sup> He pursued this goal, in part, by bringing in many new creative and technical professionals—some permanent, some frequent free-lancers—to be a part of the crew. This program did double duty—it kept staff up-to-date with the industry and it gave the students the experience and contacts they needed.

During these years the studio took on many small, unassuming projects, including corporate-style training films like *The Church Sports Official* (1986) or *Caring for the Needy* (1987), a film to train bishops in the Church’s welfare system. But there were also higher-profile works like the 1987 remake of *Man’s Search for Happiness* and a documentary made for the Missionary Department, *Called to Serve* (1991), directed by Blair Treu. While such projects made up the day-to-day operations of the studio, Johnson also ushered in a string of major projects that were each greater—longer, larger, and generally costlier—than the last. The increased scale of these films came to typify not only Johnson’s tenure but the entire Fourth Wave as well.

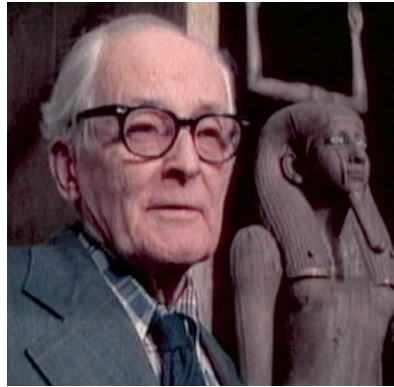
The first of these, *The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley* (1985), was also the least likely. Despite being nonfiction, it was



a truly large-scale film, following Nibley's nimble mind and life across hemispheres and millennia. This film was originally conceived by John W. Welch, Brian Capener, Hugh's son Alex Nibley, and Sterling Van Wagenen at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). They had begun filming some interviews before the MPS's involvement. Capener directed the film, and though essentially unknown today it stands out as one of the most genuine, engaging, and spiritually sensitive films in the history of Mormon cinema. While production was underway, MPS per-

sonnel began planning a series of biographical films on LDS intellectuals, but the only other film to be completed was *Speak That I May See Thee: Conversations with Arthur Henry King* (1990), directed by Tom Lefler. *Buckaroo Bard* (1988), a documentary on cowboy poetry featuring Waddie Mitchell, a real cowboy who was working a Church ranch in Nevada, also exemplified the studio's expanding vision in terms of content and style.

But it was in narrative films that the high-production-value feature film and Mormon cinematic epic began to flourish. BYU's largest film since *The Lost Manuscript* (1974) was *How Rare a Possession: The Book of Mormon* (1987). This film symbolized the evolving relationship between the Provo-based BYU Motion Picture Studio and the Salt Lake City-based Church hierarchy. Russell Holt, a Church employee, had developed the project and had hoped to produce and direct it, not through the studio but through the Audiovisual Division of the Curriculum Department. This fairly new division of the Curriculum Department had aspiring filmmakers who yearned to make their own films and not have to go to Bonneville or the BYU studio. The film, however, was assigned to the BYU studio. There were no strings attached, but because Johnson was striving to develop a positive working relationship with this new AV division, and because Holt was the writer and a good filmmaker, Johnson asked him to direct it. *How Rare a Possession*, which includes three main stories plus vignettes from the Book of Mormon, grandly indicated the direction all future Church films would take, with longer running times, increased budgets, and 35 or 70mm film stock—characteristics of large-scale prestige



Hugh Nibley at the Cairo Museum, in *The Faith of an Observer* (1985). Courtesy Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies.

productions and a marked contrast to the Third Wave, when Judge Whitaker only occasionally deviated from the use of 16mm film.<sup>106</sup>

*A More Perfect Union: America Becomes a Nation* (1989), which Johnson directed, was a secular production that can be seen as the apex of the educational films begun under Whitaker over thirty years earlier. The film was created as BYU's contribution to America's celebration of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. The story of the creation of the Constitution is complex, and the original screenplay by playwright Tim Slover was long enough for a substantial miniseries, but budgetary and other considerations necessitated shortening the film to approximately two hours' running time. KBYU, the university's PBS affiliate, was in charge of placing the film within the PBS syndication market, where it received regional distribution. It was awarded a regional Emmy and was nominated for a national Emmy, an indication that the studio was succeeding at achieving excellence in its productions. As intended, *A More Perfect Union* has had a long life: it is still a regular component in the BYU curriculum, and it is also being marketed to public and private schools around the country.



Blocking a scene, including having the wind turn pages of a mysterious book, for the film *How Rare a Possession* (1987). BYU student Mark Deakins played Lorenzo Di Francesca in the film. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

As opposed to most departments and programs at BYU, the Motion Picture Studio had always been financially self-sustaining. The need to remain in the black had caused Whitaker, Stay, and now Johnson to pursue two paths: excellent religious films in hopes of garnering further commissions from the Church, and educational productions—particularly effective under Stay—to bring in additional revenue. In the 1980s, these strategies generally worked, but with the proliferation of Church work to other entities such as Bonneville, there were still occasional gaps in the production schedule. In order to maintain a superior facility and simply cover overhead, Johnson struck upon



Peter Johnson, director, right; Brian Wilcox, photographer, center; and Kelly Mecham, assistant cameraman, left, filming the documentary *Journey of Faith* (2005) in the ancient city of Sana'a, Yemen. During Johnson's tenure at BYU, the Motion Picture Studio produced a string of large-scale films, including *How Rare a Possession* and *A More Perfect Union*. Courtesy Peter Johnson.

a new concept: he sought and gained university approval to produce feature films for theatrical release.

In doing so he had good precedent. Judge Whitaker had often spoken of moving toward the feature film, and several screenplays were solicited under both Whitaker and Stay. In the 1970s the Church, separate from BYU, sought fervently to commercially produce a theatrical biopic on Joseph Smith in Hollywood. Church agents initially contracted with Robert Bolt, hoping to repeat his success with *A Man for All Seasons*, and after this fell through in 1977, a separate entity within Bonneville International Corporation was established for the sole purpose of soliciting scripts on speculation, generally from non-Mormons. This effort, which irritated some MPS employees for being passed over, extended for several years before being given up, but its shadow has remained with Mormon cinema to this day.

Under Johnson, the MPS looked at a number of potential theatrical projects, the most developed of which was a feature on the British religious reformer John Lathrop that Johnson announced publicly before *A More Perfect Union* was even completed. These were all shelved, however, as the studio devoted the majority of three and a half years to the production of the two new endowment films, and by the time these were complete, Church leaders had arrived at a decision that made the question of commercial features moot.

Over the years, the Church had conducted several studies and evaluations about how to best position its resources for future motion picture production activities. Many ideas were considered. What had evolved over time were competing entities for Church film projects: the BYU studio,

Bonneville, the Audiovisual Division of the Curriculum Department, many smaller audiovisual operations in various Church departments, and outside free-lance producers. Within the Church structure itself were many duplications of personnel and equipment.

At this time, the tax-exempt status of BYU was also a consideration, especially when Rex Lee became university president. Although the primary objectives at the studio were to support university programs and produce Church films, and any film for commercial release was subordinate to and made with the intent to support these primary objectives, legal questions arose. Years before, the university attorney had performed a legal audit for the studio, and although it was functioning within the parameters identified by that audit, a new university administration was concerned about tax-exempt-status issues. These issues, and the fact that they saw the studio primarily doing work for the Church, made them question the studio's position at BYU.

After long and careful consideration, Church leaders made their decision, and on March 1, 1991, the Audiovisual Department was created from the Curriculum Department's Audiovisual Division. This new department would oversee all Church media production. The First Presidency wrote: "It is our hope that this action will optimize the use of Church-owned



A scene from *A More Perfect Union* (1989). The cast included some of the best-known faces from Church films of the 1980s and 90s; there was even a small part for a BYU film student named Richard Dutcher. Courtesy Brigham Young University Motion Picture Studio.

audiovisual facilities and personnel and eliminate duplication of services, equipment, manpower and production costs.”<sup>107</sup> Consolidation and efficiency were legitimate aims at a time when Church media-producing entities had multiplied—as had the means and purposes for film production.

The immediate effect was to separate the BYU studio from the university. Renamed the Latter-day Saint Motion Picture Studio, its leaders reported directly to a committee of General Authorities, including the entire First Presidency. Peter Johnson was promoted to executive producer in the new AV Department, and Merrill Dimick took his place at the Motion Picture Studio. Bill Schaefermeyer succeeded Dimick in 2002, at which point all the internal departments were reorganized vertically to completely eliminate the slight autonomy Dimick had carefully guarded. The modern MPS has no studio-wide independence but is completely integrated into the Church Audiovisual Department.

### **The LDS Motion Picture Studio**

Because of the change, educational films ceased and Merrill Dimick’s tenure became best known for a few large-scale coproductions executed by both Salt Lake and Provo interests. For instance, moves were already underway for the Church’s next large project, *Legacy* (1993). This film resulted from physical rejuvenation around Temple Square begun in the late 1980s, part of which included the Church’s purchase and renovation of the adjacent Hotel Utah, a personal project of Gordon B. Hinckley, at the time a member of the First Presidency. He desired to increase the building’s use and struck upon the idea of converting the Grand Ballroom into an IMAX theater; when this proved impossible the design was changed to accommodate 70mm. He contacted Kieth Merrill and contracted him to create a film for the venue. Hinckley, no stranger to scripts, gave Merrill the majority of his material and carefully reviewed each draft, which resulted in a film not unlike *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*, both in content—which follows the Church from 1830 to 1847—and scale. The production was typically massive and required extensive cutting to reach a running time of fifty-two minutes, allowing for hourly showings. The renamed Joseph Smith Memorial Building was dedicated on June 27, 1993, and *Legacy* premiered on July 3. Initial patronage was so high that on August 14 officials asked locals to stop coming so that those visiting from long distances could attend. By May 1994 it was estimated that several hundred thousand had seen the film.<sup>108</sup> *Legacy* not only imitated *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* but also, in its ambitious production values and spectacular exhibition setting, *Man’s Search for Happiness* from the



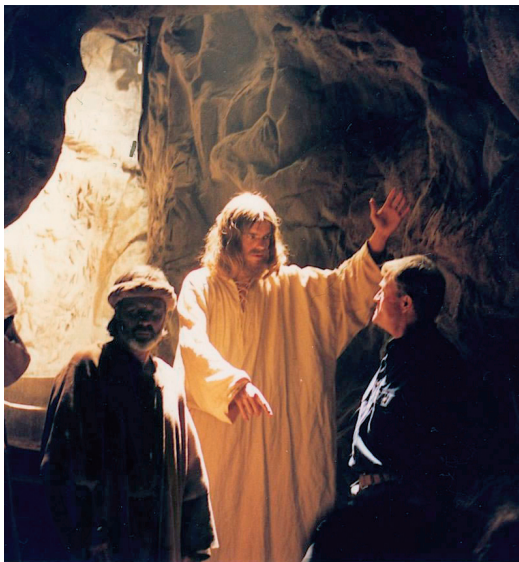


Kieth Merrill directs British actor Marcus Gilbert on the set of *Legacy* (1993). Gilbert and his costar, Kathleen Beller, were not Latter-day Saints. Today the Church uses only actors with temple recommends for its primary roles. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

1964 World's Fair. Thus, in the Fourth Wave, trends from many different periods were coming together into a single spectacular whole.

Although *Legacy* remains the Church's best-known film from 1993, it could be seen as part of a trio of major productions appearing that same year, which also included *The Mountain of the Lord* and *The Lamb of God*. The first of these depicts the construction of the Salt Lake Temple and was directed by Peter Johnson. It premiered between sessions of the April conference, three months before *Legacy*, and at seventy-five minutes is the longer of the two films. *The Lamb of God*, directed by Russell Holt, matched these films in scope but was otherwise different in length—twenty-seven minutes—and subject matter, as it depicts Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. The film's footage has been used in a several other Church productions, most notably in a virtually identical version called *To This End Was I Born*. In its original form, *The Lamb of God* is strictly biblical, causing it to be extensively broadcast and distributed as a friend-builder for the Church.

Another film on Christ's life, grander in scope and length, was the studio's last major film of the Fourth Wave. *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* represents the culmination of two decades of the mass-media mindset within institutional Church filmmaking. Essentially a sequel to *Legacy*, this film was also conceived by Church authorities, was written and directed by Kieth Merrill, and premiered in 70mm in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. And where *Legacy* placed fictional characters in a pioneer milieu, *Testaments* did the same with the Book of Mormon, introducing fictitious characters and scenarios to a scriptural context. This is intercut with scenes taken directly and literally from scriptural accounts of Christ's mortal ministry. The scale was mammoth; it remains the largest production the Church has ever undertaken. It premiered on March 24, 2000, fourteen days after *God's Army*, and continued



Danish actor Tomas Kofod speaks with director Kieth Merrill on the set of *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000). While Kofod had the appearance Merrill desired, his accent necessitated he lip-sync to the spoken dialogue of another actor—Will Swenson, later the star of *The Singles Ward* (2002). Although Kofod's performance is admirable, many Mormons have complained about the Nordic representations of Jesus prevalent in Mormon films and art. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

showing in the rechristened Legacy Theater until the end of 2005. Appearing literally as the Fourth Wave came to a close, *Testaments* is itself a fitting testament to the Mass Media Era.<sup>109</sup>

### Video and Distribution on VHS

Church production in the Fourth Wave focused on larger films with subjects of epic scope intended for theatrical exhibition or mass exposure through television. But films made or repackaged for small-scale exhibition exponentially extended the reach of Church media in this era—chiefly through the phenomenon of VHS tapes. As with the 16mm films of the Third Wave, Fourth Wave videotapes were efficiently distributed to Church units and seminary classrooms and at affordable prices by Church Distribution Center outlets. Videotapes also made possible a much broader use of film in proselytizing.

Aging content received new life through videotape. The BYU studio's large catalog of films was transferred to VHS, comprising nearly thirty *Church Films* volumes between 1983 and 1988; other compilations, generally thematic in nature, have continued to the present. Also in the 1980s, use of video flourished by way of the expanding Church Educational System, essentially the last Church organization to implement the use of visual media. From creating still filmstrips, CES progressed to becoming the Church's leading venue for the use of video in instruction. Curriculum



and organization underwent major changes in the early 1980s, and by 1984 the sentimental narrative format—often dismissed as “Mormon soap operas”—was replaced by more doctrinally oriented material, beginning with the “filmstrip-on-video” series, *Hold to the Rod* (1984–88). By the sixth of twelve planned installments, the series made the transition to full-motion video. Production, as always, was done at BYU. In 1986 the first start-to-finish video series, *I Will Lead You*, was released, and the filmstrip, in use since the 1930s, finally disappeared from LDS media. CES films, colloquially called “seminary videos,” have continued to be made and revised ever since, creating an enormous catalog of titles that have been extensively used in Sunday School and other venues.<sup>110</sup>

The Church Educational System was not the only Church entity to produce content for the mass distribution of Mormon videos. In 1985 the Church’s Missionary Department developed the concept of Direct Gospel Messages, or DGMs, which were essentially a continuation of Bonneville’s television specials (discussed below) but with greater relevancy to Church proselytizing efforts. Starting in 1987, these would generally premiere in a satellite broadcast and then be distributed on VHS cassettes to—or through—full-time missionaries, who not only had their own copies to screen but increasingly delivered tapes to viewers who had answered the Church’s television advertisements. The first DGM, *Our Heavenly Father’s Plan* (essentially a remake of *Man’s Search for Happiness*), was finished in 1987, followed by *Together Forever* (1988), arguably the Church’s most prominent production until *Legacy*. Others that followed included *What Is Real* (1989), *Labor of Love* (1989), *The Prodigal Son* (1990), and *On the Way Home* (1992).

These productions circulated widely along with other videos of Church satellite broadcasts. Such broadcasts and videotapes have included not only films but a host of training programs intended for various auxiliaries and Church leaders. Often, when a broadcast was not to be distributed on VHS, assigned members of local units recorded them live, then labeled and archived this programming in their ward and stake libraries. These taped programs, along with prepackaged videos, have long served as an important component within Church instruction and local missionary work.

## Broadcasting

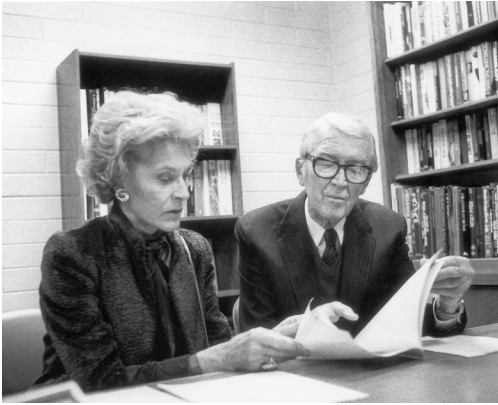
Generally speaking, Church films of the Fourth Wave intended for distribution on video cassettes became more pointedly doctrinal and were intended for the direct instruction of Mormon youth or potential converts who were learning fundamental LDS history and beliefs. In contrast,

Fourth Wave Church films and programs, primarily by KSL-TV and Bonneville Communications, that were intended for public broadcasting outlets took more of a general character or simply conveyed profamily or prosocial messages loosely connected with the Church.

Just as the development of a strong distribution and exhibition network in the Second Wave led inevitably to Church film production in the Third, the growth of Church radio and television in the Second and Third Waves led naturally to the Church's broadcast entities producing their own content. In the 1970s and 1980s, KSL and Bonneville continued to focus on broadcasting general conference, Tabernacle Choir programs, and the *Homefront* television spots, which became a hallmark of Church public relations from their first airing in 1972. But in 1974 a soft-sell television special entitled *A Christmas Child*, syndicated throughout the United States, was successful enough to pave the way for subsequent productions, and these soon became the center of Bonneville's dramatic work. In November 1976, Bonneville aired a variety show called *The Family . . . and Other Living Things* featuring the pop-singing Osmond family. Though this program



The BYU Motion Picture Studio film crew on the set of a *Homefront* television spot (1973). In the 1970s and 1980s, this series of 30-second public service announcements helped establish the Church's family-oriented image. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



Jimmy Stewart reviews the script of *Mr. Krueger's Christmas* (1980). Stewart gives a masterful performance as Willy Krueger, wavering believably between distracted feeble-mindedness and sharp mental acuity. Among Latter-day Saints, this is one of his best-known roles—often coupled with his other great Christmas film, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

has long been forgotten, the commercials that accompanied it proved crucial: a few spots offered an abbreviated Family Home Evening manual through a telephone order, marking the beginning of “media contacting” that has since included hundreds of spots aired around the globe.

Though Bonneville created many other programs throughout the ensuing years, their most significant was another holiday special, *Mr. Krueger's Christmas*. A national audience was guaranteed when James Stewart agreed to play the title role, helping make it probably Bonneville's most-seen production. A Walter Mittyesque rumination on the meaning of Christmas, it premiered on December 21, 1980, and has been rejuvenated annually through television broadcasts, VHS sales, and a twenty-fifth anniversary DVD included in the December 2005 *Ensign* magazine.

Many subsequent Bonneville productions sought to imitate *Krueger's* success through association with Christmas or Easter. The most obvious of these was *Norah's Christmas Gift* (1989), which starred Celeste Holm, a lesser-known Hollywood star, and again featured the Tabernacle Choir, Temple Square, and a protagonist dealing with the trials of old age. Further specials included *The Nativity/Luke 2* (1986) and the animated *The Other Wise Man* (1989) for Christmas, and *The Last Leaf*, *The Road to Emmaus* (airing together in 1984), and *Easter Dream* (1990) for Easter.

Church broadcasting significantly widened its audience when it came to cable television in 1988. That September the Church became one of twelve charter members in a nondenominational religious cable television network, the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network (VISN, subsequently the Faith and Values Channel, the Odyssey Channel, and then the secular Hallmark Channel).<sup>111</sup> Bonneville had to supply a great deal of the station's content. Past installments of *Music and the Spoken Word* and archived

films and programs such as sermons aired on VISN, but Bonneville also created original material. Perhaps the most unique was a shortened version of an LDS sacrament meeting called *LDS Worship Service* that featured a specially created ward with an actual bishop and other lay officers, each of whom had been called and set apart as in a traditional unit. Some of the Church's other main series have been *Families Are Forever* (1989), the adolescent lifestyle show *Center Street* (begun in 1992), and an adult version called *Times and Seasons* (begun in 1991), named for the early Church periodical and including half-hour episodes on societal issues such as Sunday worship, pornography, and interfaith help of the homeless. Individual specials have also abounded, and in general VISN represented a major initiative (ironically little known among Church members) aimed not at proselytizing but at outreach and social betterment. This was consistent with the large-scale Church humanitarian efforts that got underway during this time, with Church members often featured as global good neighbors in news coverage that has increasingly showed Mormons involved with humanitarian and disaster-cleanup efforts.

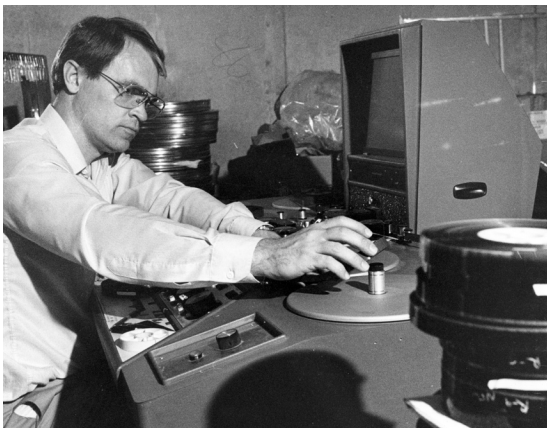
## INDEPENDENT MORMON MOVIES

### The Feature Film Returns

The quest for a Mormon feature film continued unabated from the momentum of the 1960s, even though no viable films had emerged in that decade. The Joseph Smith project mentioned earlier provided much of the impetus and spilled into the private sector. A great deal of publicity surrounded the potential multimillion-dollar picture *The American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith*, an independent film that was slated for a July 1976 release but apparently never even reached production. Within a single year, attention had shifted from Joseph Smith to his successor as the film *Brigham* began to be publicized. As with the Church's Joseph project, a core of Latter-day Saints, this time principally David R. Yeaman at Sunset Films, looked outside the Church for their principal personnel, including writer/producer Philip Yordan and director Thomas McGown. The film attempts to be a faithful biopic, an answer to the doubtful prophet portrayed in Fox's 1940 *Brigham Young*. Ironically, much of the plot copied that film, particularly in the depiction of a doubting outsider accompanying the Mormons throughout their journeys; this time, however, the film climaxed with this character's conversion.

*Brigham* premiered in Salt Lake City on November 19, 1977, and immediately ran into trouble. Although some reviews were good, many Latter-day Saints reacted negatively to its low production values (including stock footage lifted from films like *Brigham Young* itself), its corny humor, and its unsophisticated aesthetic. Eventually the film was withdrawn, reworked, and re-released in January 1978 as the “new” *Brigham*. In 1983 its name was again temporarily changed to *Savage Journey* for a television release. While *Brigham* is therefore often considered a black sheep of LDS cinema, it must be noted that the film has many strong points, particularly the relationship between Joseph and Brigham, and was the first major American theatrical film spearheaded by Mormons and dealing with Mormonism since *Corianton*, which had suffered an even worse fate.

The middling success of *Brigham* was not a deterrent to other potential filmmakers. Some, like Lyman Dayton, worked on mainstream projects that they hoped to inject increasingly with Mormonism. Others once again attempted to create an independent Mormon-themed feature. One of these was John Linton, an aspiring filmmaker who undertook an ambitious first production with the picture *Perilous Journey* (1983), which tells the fictionalized story of the historical Samuel Pucell family who journeyed in the Willie Handcart Company of 1856. In contrast to Yeaman’s production of *Brigham*, Linton eschewed Hollywood assistance in favor of local, faithful Latter-day Saints. Happily, the film is technically equal to *Brigham* and in many ways more endearing through the amateur performances themselves. Filmed on 16mm, it was briefly released in theaters in 1983 (distribution was handled by a young music company called Excel Entertainment that would become a prominent film distributor in the Fifth Wave). In September 1984, *Perilous Journey* was shown on television and released on



Director John Linton in a publicity photo for *Perilous Journey* (1984). Linton sits at a flatbed Steenbeck editing table. This film represents a tradition of amateur independent Mormon films created as labors of love in which cast and crew filled many roles. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

VHS. Linton's film, though flawed and often quaint, is vastly superior to many theatrical films of the Fifth Wave but unfortunately remains largely unknown today.

### Independent Videos

Independent videos by and about Mormons in the Fourth Wave were many and diverse but can generally be divided into four types corresponding to their intended distribution: (1) documentary films made for television, (2) video productions sold through the growing Mormon retail market, (3) less-commercial films targeting special interest groups, and (4) noncommercial amateur films. Such distinctions can help organize the otherwise chaotic assortment of Fourth Wave video productions, but it must be remembered that many films will defy placement in any single category. Indeed, Fourth Wave video productions were strongly characterized by the blurring of distinctions between amateur and professional productions, and those meant for broadcast, VHS, personal or ward exhibition, or other distribution platforms.

Independent Mormon documentaries, for instance, reached regional and sometimes national television distribution in both the United States and Canada—a professional accomplishment—as individual Church members (cinematic amateurs often simply fulfilling Church callings) created documentaries or documentary series about the Church in their geographical area. On a more professional level, BYU Instructional Television, KBYU, and other Church-related entities created many excellent films; foremost among these was a 1979 KSL documentary (mentioned here because of its secular nature) entitled *Mormon Women and Depression*, which examined how an LDS lifestyle both contributes to and protects against depression.

Lee Groberg and his screenwriter, Heidi Swinton, have become well known for their historical documentaries. Often deemed a Mormon equivalent of historical documentarian Ken Burns, Groberg began his historical productions in 1991 with *American Gunmaker*, a film on John Browning. His topics have gradually moved through Utah history to explicitly devotional subjects, often tying releases into historical anniversaries, as with *Trail of Hope* for the 1997 Pioneer Sesquicentennial.

By distributing his films on VHS, or more recently DVD, after their initial broadcast, Groberg wisely joined ranks with arguably the most popular and profitable works of the Fourth Wave, videos released within the Mormon retail market. In the 1980s and 1990s Mormons had advanced Mormon literature into a \$100-million annual market well served by retail stores dotting LDS population centers. Direct sales were also profitable.



Along with Mormon novels, music, and kitsch came the widely successful independent Mormon movie intended for home viewing.

By the 1990s many Utah-based companies produced Mormon videos en masse, usually in series, thus making this decade the age of the corporation and making mass production a characteristic of the Mass Media Era. Perhaps the first such firm was Eagle Systems and its VHS series *Stories from the Book of Mormon* (1985), followed by *The Spiritual History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1989). Far better known, however, was the Living Scriptures Company, which was founded by Jared F. Brown and Seldon O. Young in Ogden in 1974 to market Mormon-themed audio material. The company came to the fore in 1987 through a series of half-hour animated cartoons of Book of Mormon stories, directed by former Disney director Richard Rich. Several other animated and documentary series have followed. Covenant Communications Inc. also began in the 1970s with scriptural audiocassettes and became a major publisher and minor film producer, as with its *The Church History Video Tour* series in 1992 and 1993. Deseret Book acquired Covenant and its sister company, Seagull Book & Tape, in late 2006. How this merger will affect future Covenant projects and products remains to be seen.

Because video production is relatively inexpensive to create, it accommodates more diverse subjects and can target special interest groups, such as the many people attracted to Mormon apologetics and the teachings of scholars such as Hugh Nibley, featured in the aforementioned *The Faith of an Observer*. As mentioned, this film was coproduced by the BYU Motion Picture Studio and FARMS. Now a part of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU, FARMS has since become something of a minor film producer, releasing dozens of taped lectures and documentaries on archeological subjects.

Two other productions—both shot on film—depict Mormon women and children and represent some of the finest work within the Mormon cinematic canon. *Reflections* (1978), a feature-length film produced by LDS women in southern California, was a meditation on Mormon feminism during the Equal Rights Amendment controversy; and T. C. Christensen's fifteen-minute documentary, *The Mouths of Babies* (1980), simply featured delightful interviews with young LDS children on gospel subjects. Though specific in their subject matter, these films certainly were not marketed exclusively to women and children. *The Mouths of Babies*, in particular, has had a vibrant and successful career being sold on commercial VHS and DVD.

*Reflections* serves as a wonderful example of the quality and scope of amateur Mormon film in the Fourth Wave. Amateur productions boomed





A Nagra reel-to-reel sound recorder being used on location by veteran sound specialist Donald Fisk. Fisk recorded sound for numerous Church films produced by the Motion Picture Studio, including *Johnny Lingo* (1969) and the adaptation of Donald Marshall's short story "Christmas Snows, Christmas Winds" (1978). LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

during this period, much as they had in the 1930s, but now they were, predictably, on a much larger scale. With the proliferation of inexpensive consumer-level video equipment, increasing numbers of Mormons began to document not just themselves and their families but important periods and events in Church history. While purists may not consider such activities as videotaping a children's presentation in church to be Mormon cinema proper, the advent of home video has personalized Church members' experience with film in ways that institutional or professional Mormon films never could.

The blurred line between amateur and professional productions led to one of the most distinctive genres of the Fourth Wave, theater-on-video. In 1983 Scott Anderson recorded a live performance of his play *The Best Two Years of My Life* for sale on VHS (later remade as a Fifth Wave feature film); in 1984 Gary B. Lundberg filmed a performance of Janice Kapp Perry's *It's a Miracle!* and soon various other titles were adapted, some taped on stage but many done in original productions. The best known is certainly Bob Williams's 1989 adaptation of Doug Stewart and Lex de Azevedo's *Saturday's Warrior*. Stewart and de Azevedo did not participate directly and were reportedly rather disappointed the production was so stage-bound, but the video's popular success equaled that of the play's 1974 stage premiere, and an entire generation grew up unaware that it had ever existed in any other form.<sup>112</sup> Stage-to-video adaptation has become an established genre of Mormon film continuing to the present, including *The Farley Family Reunion* (1990), *Polly: A One-Woman Musical* (1993), *Eliza and I* (1997), *Hancock County* (2003), *Sixth Wife* (2004), *Book of Gold* (2005), *Discoveries* (2005), and the forthcoming 1856: *Long Walk Home* (2007).

### The Pioneer Sesquicentennial, 1997

If the 1947 Utah Centennial was the crest of the Second Wave, then the 1997 Pioneer Sesquicentennial was the tsunami of the Fourth. This year represented the largest surge in Mormon filmmaking, both within the Church and without, in the history of Mormonism. It gave common purpose and subject matter to all LDS filmmakers, unifying their projects into a collective movement hitherto unseen, and created an event for all outsiders to document. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, “The Church’s sesquicentennial celebrations were the most significant thrust in bringing the Church out of obscurity in its history.”<sup>113</sup>

The celebration’s prominence had many causes, including Church growth since 1947, the shrewd name-change from 1947’s statewide “Utah Centennial” to 1997’s more global “Pioneer Sesquicentennial,” and the new Church President Gordon B. Hinckley’s proactive engagement with the media. Momentum had been building throughout the early 1990s, with many films on early Church history and its growth in various regions. This was augmented by Utah’s statehood centennial in 1996. In 1997, the first major film was the Church’s short *Faith in Every Footstep*, which featured the First Presidency on the Mormon Trail and premiered during the services of the April general conference. The Church’s other main film was Russell Holt’s *An Ensign to the Nations*, which tells the stories of the first Church members in South Korea, Africa, and other areas.

If any independent film took center stage, however, it was Lee Groberg’s *Trail of Hope*, which aired nationally on PBS in July. But this was joined by a plethora of other films, including Ken Verdoia’s biographical documentary *Brigham Young*; Caroline Prohosky’s dance film *Woman, the Pioneer*; Richard Dutcher and Elizabeth Hansen’s one-woman film *Eliza and I*; Kevin Mitchell’s documentary series *Legacy West for Covenant*; and Gerry Troyna’s BBC documentary *Wagon Train: Journey of the Modern Pioneers*. In addition, the Church Public Affairs Department recorded news coverage in Belgium, France, Japan, and Spain, and full-fledged documentaries in Austria, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Germany (three films), Hungary, Italy, the Philippines, Poland, Romania, and Russia.<sup>114</sup> It is impossible to judge the full effect of the sesquicentennial, but the increase in cinematic activity constituted one of its primary features, illustrating the extent to which cinema had come to permeate and represent Mormon culture.

## MORMONS IN THE MAINSTREAM INDUSTRY

During the Fourth Wave, the Mormon presence in the mainstream film industry predictably swelled. For instance, productions in Utah received a boost when the Osmond family opened a state-of-the-art studio in Orem to film the *Donny & Marie* television variety show (1976–79) and other productions. Church President Spencer W. Kimball dedicated the studio on November 1, 1977, illustrating the symbiosis between media and the Church by this point.

In California and elsewhere, Latter-day Saints working in the mainstream film industry were such a broad and diverse group that it is possible to mention only a few of them. LDS actors, for example, included Terry Moore, who has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and once claimed to have been secretly married to Howard Hughes; child star Michael Lookinland, who played Bobby on television's *The Brady Bunch*; and Jimmy Espinoza, who in the early 1980s served as president of *Nosotros*, the premiere organization of Hispanic filmmakers. In television, brothers Les and Glen Charles created the sitcom *Taxi* in 1978, followed by *Cheers* in 1982, which ran until 1993 and proved to be one of the most popular and influential shows of the decade. Other industry insiders have included executives like Edwin Catmull of Pixar and Kay Whitmore of Kodak; successful producers like Gerald Molen, who won a Best Picture Oscar for *Schindler's List* (1993); and numerous creative artists such as video game composer Chance Thomas. The group, in other words, is as diverse as the industry is large.

In the 1970s, in fact, so many Church members were working in the film and television industries that some attempted to organize. By 1976 BYU was compiling a list of all LDS professionals in film and theater, and in southern California Robert Starling organized the Associated Latter-day Media Artists (ALMA) with Gordon Jump, Donna King Conkling, and others. This group sought to improve the LDS presence in media production through networking, awards, and other means; it thrived for several years before eventually being replaced by other interests. Today there are informal LDS artist associations, including filmmakers, in Los Angeles, New York, and other cities. In 2002 Richard Dutcher and Jon-giorgi Enos attempted to create a Utah Filmmakers' Association, but it was never able to get off the ground, and in January 2006 Christian Vuissa announced an LDS Film Academy as a training and networking organization for LDS filmmakers.

Two of the many Latter-day Saints who gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s were Don Bluth and Neil LaBute. Bluth moved up through the ranks at Disney animation throughout the 1970s, and many

considered him the future of the company, but in 1979 he led off a corps of deserters to start his own Don Bluth Studios. Their second feature attempt, *The Secret of NIMH* (1982), caught Steven Spielberg's attention and secured Bluth funding and distribution for his next film, *An American Tail* (1986), which proved a critical favorite and box office success. Subsequent titles include some failures but also strong successes like *The Land Before Time* (1988), *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989), and Twentieth Century Fox's *Anastasia* (1997).

Neil LaBute was born in Detroit and converted to the Church while studying theater at BYU in the 1980s. His student play *In the Company of Men* won an award from the Association for Mormon Letters, and he converted it to film in 1997. Its success—and his distinctive vision that appears at once dark yet highly moralizing—vaulted him to indie celebrity status and allowed him to adapt another play, *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998). Other stage plays, adaptations, and mainstream pictures penned by others followed, including a Showtime channel adaptation, filmed during several live performances, of his play *bash* (2000), which is LaBute's only piece to deal explicitly with the Church (although some critics assert that Mormonism informs all of his work). Because of its subject matter, however, the Church disfellowshipped him, and eventually he asked that his name be removed from the Church's records.<sup>115</sup> His career has continued unabated—in 2001 *The Shape of Things* premiered in London (it was adapted to film in 2003). Although his most recent film, a 2006 remake of the 1973 horror film *The Wicker Man*, did not garner praise equal to his earlier self-authored work, he shows no sign of slowing down.

## MAINSTREAM DEPICTIONS OF MORMONS

Fourth Wave films made by those outside the Church have generally followed two paths in depicting Mormons, with infinite degrees of variance. Documentaries and other informational films tend to treat the Church fairly and positively, while fictional films have often returned to stereotypes, nineteenth-century fear-mongering, and misrepresentations.

It is perhaps best to look at documentaries as a group, since no individual titles stand out for their depiction of Mormonism. Ross McElwee's landmark 1986 film *Sherman's March* is probably the best known. However, its stance on Mormonism, though extremely positive, comes within a single sequence of a much larger film. Similarly, Alistair Cooke's series *America* (1973) and Ken Burns's *The West* (1996) touched on the Church,

but productions that focused on Mormonism exclusively are largely forgotten today.

One non-LDS filmmaker who has made Mormonism a major feature of his oeuvre is Ken Verdoia, today a senior producer at KUED public television at the University of Utah. Verdoia is interested in Mormonism not only because of his proximity to its geographical center, but because of its remarkable history and status as a microcosm of the American experience. Accordingly, many of his documentaries, often executed as long-format journalism, focus on historical aspects of the Church, including titles like *A Matter of Principle: Polygamy in the Mountain West* (1990), *Utah: The Struggle for Statehood* (1996), and *Battalion* (2003). Many Latter-day Saints are unsettled by his approach, which often mixes politics and economics with religion, but he avers that this fused dichotomy “speaks to the very heart of the Church/State dilemma that [he finds] so compelling.”<sup>116</sup>

### **The New Anti-Mormon Film**

We have already seen the roots of a new anti-Mormon film era emerging in the 1960s, one that grew to full fruition by the 1980s. Many Latter-day Saints, however, would dispute that such an era even exists, arguing that most “anti-Mormon” films are merely mature, honest, or well-rounded looks at Mormon culture. This point of difference, apparent since *Mahlzeiten*, where some Church members are offended and some are not, lies at the heart of this new period’s complexity (contrasted with the universal Mormon outcry against films like *A Mormon Maid*). There are various reasons for this mixed response, but perhaps foremost among them is this: Because many modern Mormon exploitation films still use caricatures and stereotypes—be they nineteenth-century models like polygamy, blood atonement, and Danites, or more recent perceptions like political conservatism, moral hypocrisy, or kitschy material culture—Mormon audience members fail to see themselves on screen and therefore never feel assailed.

The main event that made such films possible was the end of Hollywood’s Production Code and the advent of a ratings system in 1968. But while this allowed for looser depictions of sex, violence, and religious misrepresentations, it did not account for mounting interest in Mormonism. For that, we must return to the causes of anti-Mormonism in the 1800s and 1910s, when the Church served as a convenient foil in America’s burgeoning quest for self-identification. With dramatically increasing growth and political presence since the 1960s, Mormonism again became an Other worthy of fear and attention. Terryl Givens cites the Church’s

political involvement in issues like the MX missile controversy and the Equal Rights Amendment, then adds: "One must here note that the Missouri Wars took place in a decade that saw the early church explode in membership from its six founders to thirty thousand members"—growth that threatened the state's political stability.<sup>117</sup> The modern echoes are obvious. With extremely optimistic predictions of Church growth by non-LDS demographers like Rodney Stark, filmmakers as diverse as comedian Trey Parker and documentarian Helen Whitney find it quite logical to address Mormonism as an important social phenomenon.

How such filmmakers do so is simultaneously the same yet different from their counterparts in the 1910s, as evolving norms within both the Church and American society have played an ironic about-face in the intervening decades. Since at least the 1950s, Latter-day Saints have moved to the center of American society, but this move occurred at the very time when the center was displaced by the privileging of the margins. "In the nineteenth century, Mormons . . . were portrayed as promiscuous misfits in a Victorian society. In the 1990s the typical Mormon character has become a Victorian misfit in a promiscuous society," says Michael Austin.<sup>118</sup> Today Mormons are easy stock characters for moral and political conservatives, and hence easy—if unfulfilling—targets for politically liberal, permissive, or sexually liberated agendas.

A final cause of the new anti-Mormon film age is video itself. It is arguable that the 1980s resurgence in anti-Mormonism in both film and literature was due in large part to the close relationship between television movies—especially docudramas and true-crime films—and similar types of pulp (primarily detective) fiction, which, since 1979, had seen a resurgence of Mormon characters exhibiting the same old anti-Mormon stereotypes from the 1800s.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, VHS gave an affordable outlet to those filmmakers who truly desired to damage the Church. The most famous of these was Ed Decker and his film *The Godmakers*, released in January 1983. Although Decker, a former Church member, advertised this as a legitimate documentary, it was roundly denounced by third-party organizations as shallow propaganda.<sup>120</sup> An initial furor arose within the Church, but the film has had no lasting effect except, ironically, in forcing subsequent anti-Mormon videos, such as *The Lost Book of Abraham* (2002), to evince more faux objectivity.

Mainstream productions have been much more enigmatic in their approach. Alfred Hitchcock's final film, *Family Plot* (1976), for instance, had the villain kill his Latter-day Saint parents in the backstory, but their religion holds no discernible purpose in the plot or influence in the villain's adult activities. One scene, however, contains significant LDS material: At



a graveside service, the camera follows the meandering protagonist while a visibly non-Mormon priest reads 2 Nephi 9:20–21 from the Book of Mormon. The passage deals with Christ’s victory over the grave and imbues the film with syntactic density and well-placed irony; Hitchcock and screenwriter Ernest Lehman would have studied the Book of Mormon carefully to find such a perfectly suitable text.<sup>121</sup> This is one of the most complex uses of Mormonism in cinema, but that same year also saw the western comedy *The Duchess and the Dirtwater Fox*, which baldly reverted to old stereotypes by depicting Mormons as being staunch like Puritans, avaricious like Jews, and lecherous like, well, Mormons.

But it was on the television screen that the anti-Mormon or Mormon-exploitation film truly came into its own. Michael Austin has noted seven major news stories between 1979 and 1989, such as a series of forgeries and murders by Mark Hofmann, and points out their crucial effect on fiction because they “occurred exactly when the true-crime novel was developing into a recognizable subcategory of detective fiction.” “In fact,” he adds, “Mormonism plays a major role in a book that could plausibly be considered the most important true-crime novel ever written: Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979), winner of the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and one of the genre’s foundational texts.”<sup>122</sup> In 1982 the novel was made into a television movie starring Tommy Lee Jones, and other television films, often adapted from pulp literature or recent headlines, followed, including *Child Bride of Short Creek* (1981), the West German miniseries *Paradise Reclaimed* (1981), *Messenger of Death* (1988), *The Avenging Angel* (1995), *Shot in the Heart* (2001), and many others, with *The Elizabeth Smart Story* (2003) one of the most recent.

From these roots, Mormonism and its offshoots became central to numerous theatrical films, including space-age satire in Trent Harris’s *Plan 10 from Outer Space* (1994), Rodney Dangerfield’s polygamous woes in *My 5 Wives* (2000), a missionary’s struggle to accept his homosexuality in C. Jay Cox’s *Latter Days* (2003), and even modern remakes of old favorites in TNT’s *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1996) for cable television and Ian Allen’s silent, black-and-white *Trapped by the Mormons* (2005) for the university/art house circuit. Films with verbal references to Mormonism and minor LDS characters are far more numerous and, generally, far more prejudiced.

Within this milieu, perhaps the most notorious Mormon-related production of the Fourth Wave was Trey Parker’s *Orgazmo* (1997), in which he plays a missionary induced to perform in a pornographic film in order to pay for an expensive temple wedding with his faithful sweetheart. The very title and NC-17 rating made the film scandalous within Mormonism



at the time, but in ways it actually boded well for the future. The recycling of the nineteenth-century character of the oversexed Mormon elder into parody and farce follows traditional generic patterns and therefore suggests that this particular stereotype has finally exhausted itself. Just as interestingly, while *Orgazmo* has its share of inaccuracies and cheap barbs, in the end Mormon values are rewarded and the faith defended, something that has also proven true—with the expected jokes and irony—in Parker's subsequent project, the animated television series *South Park*. But *Orgazmo* had one other unintended effect as well: like *A Victim of the Mormons*, it served as an immediate catalyst for Mormon filmmakers to reject their representations in mainstream productions and take up arms to create their own cinematic image. In any case, it would be Latter-day Saints themselves using missionaries much more creatively as subject matter—in both comical and tragic modes—within the first and many subsequent films of the Fifth Wave.

#### **Fourth Wave Reprise**

The Fourth Wave was obviously a time when institutional and other positive LDS films gained a vitality that allowed them to compete with their critical counterparts. Under Presidents Kimball, Benson, Hunter, and Hinckley, American Latter-day Saints, including the filmmakers among them, acquired the cultural confidence necessary to assert themselves as a legitimate and unfairly marginalized component of American society. Cinema, the populist art of the new millennium, was the logical place to express such sentiments. Pressure was building behind the dam, and all it would take was a single film to make it burst.