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In Particularity We Trust:richard Dutcher's Mormon Quartet And A Latter-Day Saint Spiritual Film Style

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IN PARTICULARITY WE TRUST: RICHARD DUTCHER'S MORMON QUARTET AND A LATTER-DAY SAINT SPIRITUAL FILM STYLE

by

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DEDICATION

To Dennis and Laurie Brown, without whom I never would have started.

To Suzy, Maryn, Avery, and Parker, without whom I never would have finished.

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INTRODUCTION

Mormonism and Movies

As an introduction to this project, I begin with two personal stories. They may seem a little disconnected at first, but I hope to show how the link between these two experiences are at the heart of this dissertation. One of my very earliest memories is of the movies. I can actually remember the first time I ever went to the theater to see a film. I was four or five years old and my parents took my older brother and me to see one of the many late-70s re-releases of *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977). It was at a single-screen theater in a tiny Idaho town called Rupert. I was sandwiched between my mom on my right and my brother on my left, and as the famous yellow-worded crawl moved up the screen, my mom whispered in my ear and read to me: "It was a period of civil war…." At five, I didn't have a strong grasp on what a "galactic empire" was or what "sinister agents" were, but I got the gist and knew they weren't good. The words disappeared into the inky black, John Williams' score turned quiet and pensive for a moment, the camera panned down to a star field and distant planets, and suddenly a small white spaceship screamed into view, desperately trying to outrun the gigantic, triangular craft blasting hot red lasers in its direction.

Like almost every other American at the time, I was utterly transfixed. Of course, I loved Luke Skywalker's pure, deadly-looking blue light saber and Darth Vader's obsidian samurai helmet. I loved the Wookie, the droids, the cantina, and the fantastic explosion of sparks that marked the destruction of the Death Star. I loved the movie, of course, but more than that, I knew at that early age that I loved The Movies. Everything about the experience of film and filmgoing enchanted me -- going to the theater, waiting in line for tickets, the sound of the popcorn machine, examining the posters for all the coming attractions, waiting for the lights to dim, the

previews, everything. With the advent of VHS a few years later, I looked forward to going to the local video store, carefully making my selection, and then sitting on our couch in the basement, popcorn at the ready, and letting the novelty of a real movie in my own living room wash over me. Watching movies, talking about them, and eventually writing about them have been major components of my life for literally as long as I can remember.

My second story comes about ten years later. I was a teenager attending Sunday School like the good Mormon boy I was raised to be. I was in a dim, cinderblock-lined classroom in an LDS meetinghouse in Rexburg, Idaho. The lesson was about developing our talents, particularly in the service of the church. If we could play a musical instrument, we were told, it would be a huge opportunity to accompany the hymns in church. If we were good at math, we could be called to be the congregation's financial clerk when we were older. At one point in the lesson, the teacher gave me a quote from Spencer W. Kimball, the man who had been president and prophet of the church from 1973 until 1985. The speech, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," was given in 1967 to a group of LDS educators and is a kind of pep talk for Mormon artists. Most talks given by church authorities revolve around repentance, forgiveness, faithfulness, missionary work, and other religious topics. Kimball's unusual talk is still held in high regard by Mormon creative types even today. The quote from the talk read:

"We are proud of the artistic heritage that the Church has brought to us from its earliest beginnings, but the full story of Mormonism has never yet been written nor painted nor sculpted nor spoken. It remains for inspired hearts and talented fingers yet to reveal themselves. They must be faithful, inspired, active Church members to give life and feeling and true perspective to a subject so worthy. Such masterpieces should run for months in every movie center, cover every part of the globe in the tongues of the people, written by great artists, purified by the best critics.

Our writers, our motion picture specialists, with the inspiration of heaven, should tomorrow be able to produce a masterpiece which would live forever. . . Take a Nicodemus and put Joseph Smith's spirit in him, and what do you have? Take a da Vinci or a Michelangelo or a Shakespeare and give him a total knowledge of the plan of salvation of God and personal revelation and cleanse him, and then take a look at the statues he will carve and the murals he will paint and the masterpieces he will produce. Take a Handel with his purposeful effort, his superb talent, his earnest desire to properly depict the story, and give him inward vision of the whole true story and revelation, and what a master you have!" (Kimball).

The quote struck me as important. Here was a man I believed to be a prophet of God, someone who literally and directly communed with the Divine, and he was talking about (among other things) movies, one of my favorite things in the world. More than that, he was suggesting that stories and experiences from my world, my religion could and should be made into films. Mormons should be making movie masterpieces that should run in theaters for months? Well, if the prophet says so! I didn't know it at the time, but that quote (and later the whole speech once I tracked it down) put me on a course that eventually led me to this project.

I have spent my life being simultaneously preoccupied with movies and with my cultural, doctrinal, and intellectual identity as a Mormon. Mormonism is a vast, complicated belief system that stretches back to creation and forward into eternity, and it influences the way its adherents see literally every aspect of the world. From the purpose of life to where we go when we die, from how to spend your money to who, when, and where you get married, the Latter-Day Saint worldview leaves nothing untouched. So as I grew up, went to school, got married, got jobs, went to grad school, taught, had kids, and continued going to the movies, I constantly wrangled and angled, trying to find how and where and why my religious beliefs and practices had a place.

I felt as though I was constantly in a liminal space – too arty, intellectual, and liberal for my traditional Mormon friends and family, and too conservative, old fashioned, and rigid for my non-Mormon friends and family. And how did movies fit in? Culturally, western American Mormons were a movie going people, but it was also regularly preached in all levels of the church that we had to be careful about what movies we watched because many were "produced by satanic influences" (Peterson "Touch Not the Evil Gift Nor the Unclean Thing"). Rated R movies were generally considered forbidden, and many PG13 movies had to be looked at with a suspicious eye so we didn't accidentally "pollute your minds with such degrading matter, for the mind through which this filth passes is never the same afterwards" (Benson "Youth of The Noble Birthright"). How was I to reconcile that suspicion and constant danger of "pollution" with the visceral thrill and enlivening I felt when watching or talking about the latest movie I'd seen? Mormonism is not Hassidism and I'm no Asher Lev, but I did feel a conflict between the standards of my Latter-Day Saint world and this worldly thing I loved – movies.

The conflict was particularly sharp as I thought about President Kimball's comments and the thoughts of other church leaders who suggested that Mormons should not only be involved in things like film production, but they should be excelling at it. I wondered why this wasn't happening and why the only real "Mormon cinema" around for most of my life consisted of the glossy, bowdlerized institutional films produced by the Church itself for the sake of training or proselyting.

A couple of things happened in the last ten years that have significantly altered how I connect and find meaning in both movies and Mormonism. First of all, there was a small spate of Mormon produced and themed films beginning with Richard Dutcher's *God's Army* in 2000. For someone as preoccupied with the idea that Mormon stories should be explored in film in honest,

artistically compelling, and uncensored ways as me, that film was literally world-changing. As he produced other LDS-themed films, I became convinced his work was important and worth study. Another thing that happened was beginning grad school and encountering Paul Schrader's book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer*. As slim and, in some ways, flawed as that book is, it became an important catalyzing element that provided a way for me to approach the idea of not just films about Mormons or their religion but rather Mormon film, movies that are, in some way, inherently Mormon. Of course, I had thought about the idea of film style before, but it hadn't ever occurred to me that a style could evoke or invoke a spiritual experience. The idea that there could be a Mormon film style grabbed hold of me and hasn't let go for the better part of a decade. Even when I tried to leave Schrader's definitions and concepts behind in favor of other, less polemical, more contemporary critics writing about spirituality or religion in film, I always ended up returning and holding up the newer ideas against his work.

Ultimately, this project has given me a way to reconcile, for lack of a better word, movies and Mormonism. There is a way that film, a generally secular art form in the United States, can evoke a Transcendent experience in viewers and, more specifically, there are ways that Transcendent encounter can reflect a particular religious worldview, specifically that of Mormonism. It is far from a perfect reconciliation. This is no Grand Unified Theory of Mormonism and Movies. Rather, this is a tentative reach in the direction of talking about the underdeveloped subject of religion and spirituality in film and the almost completely unknown subject of Mormon cinema. I will begin by elaborating on some of the major questions and concerns in the field of religion and film, including Schrader, and from there I will make my case for the importance of religious particularity when interpreting and writing about spiritual film.

The Problem of Spiritual Film

As Andre Bazin once wrote, "cinema has always been interested in God" (61). Of course, on its surface, this is an easy interest to explain: most film producers are interested in anything that will sell tickets (or rentals or downloads). As long as there is an audience for films that deal with God, religion, spirituality, or encounters with the ineffable, such films will be made. Richard Blake points out that in our "arguably post-Christian age" and with Hollywood's aversion to the controversy that usually accompanies any big screen depiction of religious figures or stories, "Hollywood should despise religion, but it does not, simply because on occasion religion works for it" ("From Peepshow to Prayer") The link between religion and the cinema, tempestuous though it may be, is solid and long established.

Christian passion plays were among some of the first filmed narratives in the early part of the Twentieth century. Religious thinkers debated the moral value and effects of movies and movie going. Preachers and pastors argued for and against the use of film in sermons and proselytizing. The Catholic League of Decency influenced film content and reception for a large portion of Hollywood's classical period. Evangelical Christians use film as a way of disseminating their message, boosting member morale, and (hopefully) bolstering their ranks. Provocative films dealing with figures and events held sacred by one Christian denomination or another have been the subject of fiery protests and passionate debate. Films such as *The Last Temptation of Christ, Priest, Dogma*, and, in a different way, *The Passion of the Christ* have brought the intersection of religion and film to the forefront of public American consciousness. While Bazin points out that "cinema has always been interested in God" (61), religion, it would appear, has always kept its eye on film as well. One way or another, the entities we think of as "religion" and "film" can't leave each other alone.

Though film and religion have been, as S. Brent Plate writes, "intertwined" since the beginning of movies, serious scholarship regarding their relationship has only begun to cohere over the last couple of decades (*The Religion and Film Reader* 2). Increasingly, the formal study of where movies and the Transcendent intersect and how they interact has become a valid academic pursuit and has become the subject of important work by theorists like S. Brent Plate, Clive Marsh, Gaye Ortiz, John Lyden, Joel Martin, and Conrad Oswalt Jr. S. Brent Plate points out that the critical study of film and religion has come of age and he cites as evidence "the tremendous upsurge of publications in the field; the establishment of a program unit on film and religion within the American Academy of Religion; the launch of the online *Journal of Religion and Film*; a growing number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses devoted to the study; and an increasing number of students writing theses and dissertations on related topics" (2).

As is often the case with any nascent area of study, the first concerns are definitional. S. Brent Plate addresses what is the most central question to this field. He wonders "what exactly 'religion' and 'film' might mean in various contexts" (3). In other words, what is meant by film, what is meant by religion and how do those definitions change as their context changes? John C. Lyden points out the difficulty of clearly defining something as abstract and ineffable as religion. He writes that it is "a construct we have invented as a label for certain sorts of activities that we classify under this rubric. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as the subject matter we classify as religion, or that we cannot say anything about those things we call religion – it is simply a recognition that whatever definitions we favor, they represent an interpretation from a particular viewpoint (36). There is such a thing as a religion but any attempts we make to define it will ultimately be insufficient and biased.

We must ask, can we define religion in a way that is broad enough to include all systems and constructs that might usefully apply but that is also narrow enough to still be acknowledged as "religion?" One must also consider the fact that most scholarly work that has been done on religion and film to this point has been by white, male academics who, through belief or cultural affiliation, identify with the Judeo-Christian belief system. One primary concern that is only beginning to be addressed is the fact that there are religions in the world other than Christianity and those belief systems can and do interact with film and culture in equally potent and viable ways. In the spirit of full disclosure, I am also a white, male, Christian academic. While the inclusion of world religions in the expansion and evolution of the film and religion field is crucial, it doesn't fall within the scope of this project. As I explore the definitions of religion and its intersections with film, it will be primarily from the realm of Christianity, specifically the corner of Christianity that is Mormonism.

John C. Lyden recommends definitions by theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich and anthropologist Clifford Geertz as useful ways to see religion in a way that will most effectively allow it to interact with film. Tillich defines religion as the thing to which we give our greatest amount of devotion and from which we expect the most profound and lasting sense of reward, our "ultimate concern." It could be a specific embodied vision of a bearded God on a cloud, dead and gone ancestors, or a golden calf on a dais. What makes Tillich's definition both useful and problematic is that it is not limited to a traditional idea of worshiping a god. As Lyden writes, "Even if one denies the existence of any transcendent reality, one will still hold something as being of greatest concern for one's being, that which one finally values more highly than anything else. Even the cynic takes his cynicism with 'ultimate seriousness,' and so his cynical philosophy becomes his ultimate concern" (38). This definition's comprehensive and seemingly

all-encompassing nature is both its strength and its weakness. It isn't bound down by the persnickety details of individual dogma or ritual. Instead, it allows for broad inclusion of worldviews, practices, and belief systems. However, it also somewhat saps and neuters the idea of religion. Lyden observes that this complete inclusion of any kind of belief, even unbelief, as religion or ultimate concern, "would seem to distort the normal sense of the term and the meaning implied by it" (39). So, while it is comprehensive, Tillich's definition is so broad, it doesn't stay within the mysterious boundaries that contain "religion."

Clifford Geertz defines religion as a system of symbols that, through a sense of factuality and realism, gives participants a sense of "a general order of existence" (90). This symbol set gives meaning to the meaningless, order to chaos. Geertz writes that their purpose is to "deny that there are inexplicable events, that life is unendurable, and that justice is a mirage" (108). In contrast to Tillich's idea that any "ultimate concern" qualifies as religion, Geertz specifies that religion consists of symbolism that gives meaning, specifically, as the above quote implies, a positive meaning. This definition escapes the problem of being overly-open while still allowing for the differences in ritual, practice, and belief for individual religions.

S. Brent Plate's question of "what does film mean" is not so much a question of "how do we define cinema as a whole" as it is one of "how does the connection to religion define or alter how we think of cinema?" Plate asks, "If, for example, Mormon production companies create films for proselytizing purposes, is it really a 'film' in the cultural, artistic sense? Or is it simply an extension and a tool of religion? Is film a cultural category that at times competes with religion? When is it synonymous with religion?" (3). He wisely suggests that such questions can only be answered on an individual, film-by-film basis. But these central questions must be asked as academics attempt to examine and articulate the relationships between cinema and religion:

are there differences between films made with the artistic, cultural, and economic goals American audiences have come to expect from Hollywood features and films made by, for, and/or about participants in a particular religion? Are institutional religious productions really film or are they just commercials for God and a particular way of thinking about Him? Are there places where religious propaganda and art run together and, if so, what and where are they? Within the filmic world of a specific religious tradition, what are the important points of distinction between institutional film and films made by independent believers?

The primary questions of film and religious studies seem to be the "how" of it all. How does religion tell viewers to experience film? How does religion attempt to define, corral, enhance, mitigate, or interpret our movie going experience? More than anything else, how religion influences viewers to interact with cinema is what scholars have attempted to define.

Paul Tillich puts forward three distinctions in regards to how faith and culture interact and, therefore, how we are to interpret them. He suggests autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy are three primary ways religion and culture/the arts coexist. Autonomy is the system under which culture and religion are separate. Culture is independent of "the Church" and the two leave each other alone. Heteronomy happens when an outside law is placed over culture – religion attempting to censor or alter culture for moral purposes, for example. Instead of either of these perspectives, Tillich favors the synthesis approach of theonomy, which holds that "art may appear to have nothing to do with religion, but in fact the content of great art is the same content of religion, here defined as 'directness towards the Unconditional'" (Lyden 15). Tillich doesn't think of "the Unconditional" as some sort of higher being, but as a "reality of meaning," and "the ultimate and deepest meaning" of life (Tillich 162). Like the definitions of religion mentioned earlier, the attempts at finding useful ways for religion and culture to interact are often a matter

of finding a set of parameters that are wide enough to be inclusive but narrow enough to form a meaningful field of inquiry.

Theorist Clive Marsh draws the distinction between religion and theology, suggesting that looking at the practice of reconciling belief to experience is the proper way of engaging with film. Marsh simply states "'theology' is 'God-talk'. . . All theology is talk about God" (22). He then goes on to write that regardless of what religious tradition in which a person participates, anyone engaging in theology seeks "to relate the understanding of God with which they work to the living experience of God claimed within that tradition, as expressed preeminently in worship and ethical practice" (23). Marsh takes a realist interpretation of film saying it was "born out of a desire to reproduce images which represent the world in which we live . . . to capture life and 'freeze' it for posterity" (10). If film is a representation or document of reality, we can then use it as one way of testing for God, checking the experiences presented there against our ideas of the Divine and how it makes itself present in both the filmed and actual world.

Joel Martin suggests there are three different perspectives from which a viewer and scholar could approach the nexuses of film and religion. Like Marsh, Martin suggests theology is the first, most obvious view to take. A theological approach to film focuses on "religion in its Christian or Jewish forms" and on how to link "modern cultural expressions to scriptural antecedents" (9). While this approach is often productive, it is also somewhat colonialist in that almost any narrative can be usurped and made into a specifically Christian or Jewish story. In addition to the difficulties presented by turning *The Wizard of Oz* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* into a Christian allegory, a theological approach as Martin describes it is really only useful in cultures strongly shaped by Christianity or Judaism. "It defines religion too narrowly and tends toward ethnocentrism," he writes (9).

To avoid that narrowness, Martin also suggests "a more inclusive, cross-cultural understanding of religion" through the study of "comparative mythology" (9). He cites Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell in pointing out that religion can be looked at nontheologically and that it can be broadened into a universal quest for a brush with the sacred. This approach is the extreme opposite end of the spectrum from the narrow, ethnocentrism of a theological point of view as it actively seeks out connections to sacred representations in art, architecture, dreams, worship, and narratives from across the world. It is inclusive to the extreme. A comparative mythological approach has its weakness, however, in its lack of historical and political grounding. "Myth critics focus on our psychological quest for meaning but tend to ignore the way meaning is always politicized and historicized" (10). So while there are connections George Lucas's *Star Wars* films and Joseph Campbell's "monomyth," for instance, there are also links to the political and historical world in which the films were created. Emperor Palpatine has as much to do with Richard Nixon as he does with the Shadow archetype in the heroic quest. These earthier, more contemporary references are interesting, productive connections that might be ignored or glossed over by mythological criticism.

Ideological criticism is the third approach Martin discusses. Rather than focusing on specific religious references or on links between the film and universal ideas of the Sacred, ideological critics ask how religion and myth are employed "toward concrete political and social ends" (11). Race, class, gender, and power relations are the territory of ideology, and religion is simply a cog in the machinery, rather than the machine itself. This approach obviously recognizes the actual world in which film and religion operate, allowing scholars to access much that a strict theology or myth critic might miss. However, it too has its limits. Martin observes that, "some ideological critics focus so tightly on politics that they end up treating religion

simplistically. Because they have forgotten the complexity of religion and its relative autonomy as a domain of culture, these critics cannot properly be said to be practicing religious studies" (11). If one is trying approach film and its interactions with religion, it makes sense not to downplay religion to the point of being inconsequential.

The relationship between film, religion, and film criticism, however, is quite new and is still amorphous. In recent decades, the conversation about film and religion has been about the conversation itself with critics asking, how do we talk about these things in ways that are useful? What approaches will enable us to understand most clearly the value in the intersections that film and religion share? Scholars have used Marxism, mythology, sociology, and a host of other literary and social scientific frameworks to examine film and religion. Interestingly, many of these approaches involved stripping away or ignoring religious particularity – both that of the film and of the critic. Despite the ongoing relationship between cinema and religion, the secular character of Hollywood and the decidedly non-religious world of academia (a world that seems, at best, suspicious of any sort of traditional religious expression and, at worst, aggressively anti-religion) seem to hamstring specific, sincere, academically rigorous discussions. It is easier to discuss film and religion merely as cultural products or as examples of hegemonic power structures than as something as seemingly touchy-feely and soft-headed as places where one might interact with the Transcendent.

Of course, many self-proclaimed religious film critics haven't done themselves any favors either. As much as traditional academics have tried to elide specific dogma and doctrine, much of the discussion taking place on the other side of this divide for the last hundred years has been simplistic and strictly morally-based. Is this film uplifting? Is it in keeping with a given group's tenets and traditions? Will it edify us or damn us? The existence of the Hayes Office, the

Catholic League of Decency, and the present-day MPAA are evidence of the influence of that discussion. While these questions have clearly been influential, they are hardly the only or best questions scholars can be asking.

Richard Blake suggests that, after a century of such discussions, it's time "to broaden the question of religion and film from morality to spirituality" ("Peepshow"). To my mind, one central question that needs the attention of scholars is, how do we define what we *mean* by spiritual cinema? This definitional question leads to a host of other sub-questions: Is there a difference between a religious and a spiritual film? Can a movie be one without being the other? Are there successful examples of both? How do we know? Do we measure a spiritual or religious film by its content? By its style? By the reception from its audience? What combination of filmmaker, production, distribution, and reception makes a film spiritual? These are thorny questions if for no other reason than spirituality, the Transcendent, the ineffable are utterly subjective and cannot be quantified objectively. So how do we measure the unmeasureable? How do we detect the invisible in a medium that is primarily visual?

Religious Film &/Vs. Spiritual Film

While there can certainly be overlap, I believe there is a difference between religious film and spiritual film. As I see it, the difference is primarily between content versus style. I define religious film as movies that depict or address specific doctrines, religious practices, sacred stories and/or sacred characters in a positive, sometimes proselytizing way. They are overtly religious in their content and generally orthodox in their treatment of their material. While there are dramatic budgetary, production, distribution, and ideological differences between, say, *The Ten Commandments* (DeMille 1956) and the contemporary Christian film, *Fireproof* (Kendrick 2008), both offer positive, even evangelical representations of specific religious stories or themes

as their primary content. It is what is in the films' content that qualifies them as religious. They are telling us religious stories in the way one might hear them in Sunday School.

Traditionally, spiritual film has more to do with form than content. Rather than tell a specifically religious story or forward a particular dogma, they attempt to give viewers an encounter with something Transcendent. They are films, sometimes utterly secular in content, which express the possibility of a larger, invisible world around and within our everyday existence. While it may be about adulterous Japanese office workers (*Early Spring*, Ozu 1956) or surviving in a post-apocalyptic wasteland (*Stalker*, Tarkovsky 1979), spiritual film suggests that the Transcendent is woven throughout the immanent.

Paul Schrader's 1972 treatise *Transcendental Style in Film* is one of the first and most influential texts about the idea of a spiritual style in film. In it, Schrader examines films by Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer and suggests that there is an actual filmic form that "expresses the Transcendent" (9). Schrader is quick to point out that the Transcendent in film is not the same as the "sniffles, sobs, and goosebumps one has experienced at religious films. It is neither a personal vision nor an official catechism" but rather, he claims that "the proper function of transcendental art is . . . to express the Holy itself, and not to express or illustrate holy feelings (4,7). He goes on to write that his book is "quite simply, a study of contemporary artistic hierophanies" (9) and that those heirophanies, those moments of divine encounter, "bring man as close to the ineffable, invisible, and unknowable as words, images, and ideas can take him" (8).

In its examination of the films by the above-mentioned directors, the book ultimately comes down to an argument that the more a film strips away its elements – moving cameras, non-diegetic sound, expressive performances – the closer it comes to expressing something so

pared-down and essential that it verges on a kind of holy expression. As John C. Lyden puts it, "These films evoke a sense of 'transcendence' by pointing beyond the emptiness of the 'everyday' to a higher reality" (26). Schrader compares Ozu's films to haiku and Japanese Zen gardening, Bresson's to Byzantine iconography, and Dreyer's to Gothic architecture trying to draw parallels between their stillness, severity, and power as Transcendent expression (12).

While the book is laudable for its attempts to formulate a method of looking at film as a form of sacred expression especially at a time before film and religion were considered valid academic companions, it is a perfect example of Marsh's claims about the dangers of trying to form a universal theory from a very narrow perspective. Schrader, famously, received a strict Calvinist upbringing and, therefore, his understanding of the Transcendent and spirituality is naturally influenced by that religion's dim view of human nature, the idea that life is largely a futile struggle against a bleak world, and the conception of God as aloof, harsh, and somewhat arbitrary. Schrader's book was an important initial step into the discourse about a Transcendent film style, but it fails to acknowledge its own limited scope. While his idea of the Transcendent dovetails with Tillich's "ultimate concern," it doesn't take into consideration the wider range of religion and theology possible in cinema. Schrader's approach fails to recognize that the Calvinist spiritual film style doesn't necessarily look like a Mormon (or any other) spiritual film style.

In Particularity, We Trust

In trying to navigate these complicated, abstract waters, Clive Marsh brings up an excellent, often overlooked consideration when it comes to criticism about religion and film, which is that critics and scholars must be "more conscious than ever of the interpretive communities out of which we speak. Not only that, we must consciously use our participation in

those communities as the basis upon which we can undertake interpretation at all" ("Religion, Theology, and Film"). Critics seeking to look at film through any sort of religious lens must acknowledge the particularity and specificity of his own religious/spiritual preferences and experiences. We must recognize that every religion has its own lens through which to see the world, and each lens has a different tint, its own set of cataracts and flaws, its own points of focus and intensity. Rather than pretending that these influences don't exist or that the particularity of our version of religion and spirit is, more or less, the same as the next guy, we must embrace and utilize them in making a more honest, specific, useful kind of criticism.

The purpose of film criticism proper, according to Dudley Andrew, is "to formulate a schematic notion of the capacity of film," to gain "a comprehension of the cinematic capability" (ii). Since the beginning, this exploration of capacity has largely revolved around film's relationship with concepts of reality. What film is or does and how it accomplishes its purposes, whatever they may be, centers on how it relates to our conception of what is "real" in the world around us. This is significant because, as Randy Astle points out,

> "the 'ontology of the photographic image,' . . . became the chief locus of debate in film theory. Frequently contention arose not because of disagreements regarding the nature of cinematic capability but because of those regarding the nature of reality, as Marxists, feminists, existentialists, Christian apologists and others all saw the world through vastly different eyes . . . [therefore] the ontology of the cinematic image depends upon the ontology of the universe" ("The World Through a Veil").

The idea that the way you see the universe, the way you interpret reality absolutely forms the way you interpret the capacity and purpose of film dovetails with Clive Marsh's ideas about religious particularity. He sees the danger in academics speaking generally about religion and using terms such as "spiritual significance" and "windows to transcendence" without the critic considering his or her own religious background and baggage. As he points out, "just as there is no metanarrative, or monomyth, so there is no 'religious' reading as such of any film, for there is

no 'religion' in relation to which such a reading can be constructed" ("Religion, Theology, and Film"). There is no universal religion, so how can there be a universal religious interpretation of a film? There cannot. So, rather than trying to force an impossible generality, Marsh suggests the opposite: embracing and acknowledging specificity. He contends

"the most fruitful dialogue with film will emerge from sustained conversation largely undertaken from within a single – but diverse – tradition which the interpreter knows well, in all its complex diversity. Buddhist, Christian and Jewish readings, for example . . . would be preferable to religious readings of film. At least then the theological ideologies are out in the open, and are being examined at the point at which they interact with commended or critiqued ideologies of the films being interpreted" ("Religion, Theology, and Film").

Marsh proclaims himself to be a Catholic critic and urges other academics to declare their religious and/or philosophical background as well. This is not for the sake of dividing into dogmatic camps, but rather to enable both critic and reader to see the ground upon which they stand as they interact.

I suggest that my central questions about spiritual cinema (What is it? How do we know?) and the call for acknowledging religious particularity in our criticism are essential to one another. Rather than attempting to create a universal theory of what spiritual cinema is or how such a thing would come about, I suggest a more productive, interesting approach would be to formulate a religion-specific articulation of spiritual cinema. If Marsh is to be believed, it's happening anyway – all of his criticism is, ultimately, Catholic-specific criticism because he is Catholic. His views and biases, his interpretations and understandings are all colored by the way he views Deity, the purpose of life, morality, aesthetics, and all the rest. If all criticism (and spectatorship, for that matter) is colored by our individual experiences with religion and the spirit, why not just embrace that, be candid about it, and discuss film with it on the table, rather than hidden under the rug of supposed objectivity?

This is not to say we should all turn into autoethnographic memoirists and cast our objectivity and academic rigor aside. Nor is it to say that everything from the simplest movie review to the most complex dissertation needs to be framed in terms of religion. Nor am I suggesting we should divide into camps of believers and non-believers, Baptists versus Catholics, Mormons versus Muslims. On the contrary, the more we are able to map out and articulate our own versions of reality and concepts of how film and theory coincide with those versions, the sooner we can recognize commonalities and connect with the realities of others.

This project of this dissertation is to examine the first four theatrically-released films of independent filmmaker Richard Dutcher, the so-called "Godfather of Mormon cinema." I use Dutcher's films as a focus point to pursue the questions of "Is there a Mormon spiritual film style" and "if so, what are its formal elements?" I argue that, while a Mormon film style is nascent and only developing in stops and starts, Dutcher's first four films contain a developing arc of formal elements such as shot composition, camera movement, film and sound editing, lighting, and certain themes and content that can be extrapolated into the beginnings of a film style of spirituality that is culturally and doctrinally specific to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

This line of inquiry obviously raises both contextual and theoretical questions about the relationship between cinema and the Latter-Day Saint church, the nexuses and overlaps between religious and spiritual film, and the validity of the idea of "spiritual" film in general. Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film* was an important first step, but it was simultaneously too narrow and too general. Schrader using his own unacknowledged Calvinism to explain a would-be universal theory of filmic spirituality, while fascinating, was limiting and, in a way, dishonest. I intend to embrace religious specificity in both my selection of films to examine and

in the theoretical ground upon which I stand. Rather than pursue a style or a concept of spirituality that is universal to all, I want to zoom in and focus on how the beliefs and ideals about the Divine from one specific faith, the Mormons, might manifest themselves on screen.

Like Schrader, I want this project to be a study of heirophany through film, but, as a life-long Mormon, my concept of the Transcendent encountered through that heirophany is different than his. In chapter two, I will specifically address the idea of fusion (or the attempt at it) as it relates to Mormon film style. As a precursor to that, however, I want to suggest that the Latter-Day Saint concept of the Divine is a fusion between the still, enigmatic, mysterious Transcendent articulated by Schrader and illustrated by Bresson and Dreyer (and to a lesser degree Ozu) and a much more knowable, familial God. Mormons read and believe in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and so believe in the violent, vengeful, sometimes seemingly capricious God that wiped out whole civilizations in the Old Testament. They believe in a God who appears as a pillar of fire, a burning bush, or a cloud of light. That God is part of the Mormon divine.

However, because of Joseph Smith and the revelations he claimed, Latter-Day Saints also believe in a God who is warm, paternal, positive, and uplifting. The first, most basic teaching of Mormon doctrine is that God is the father of all people. Rather than some distant, disembodied force that may or may not care about the events in the lives of humans, the Latter-Day Saint God is a loving, attentive, literal father who constantly watches and tries to influence the lives of His children. He is a purposeful deity whose sole intent is to help his children qualify to return to live in his presence in the afterlife. In fact, this world was created with the intention of being a kind of proving ground where we could gain mortal bodies, exercise our moral agency for good or evil, develop our capacity for humbling ourselves and accepting God's will, and thereby become more like Him. Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, rather than some dumb

mortal mistake or unforeseen Biblical plot twist, was, in the Latter-Day Saint view, an important, planned-for catalyzing element of a much larger plan designed to refine and empower God's children.

Even though Mormons believe every aspect of life is purposeful and part of a larger plan, there are, of course, times when the events of one's life or world events are cruel, excruciating, and seemingly senseless. The mysterious, cruel God of the Old Testament is still very much a component of the Mormon divine. However, that seeming inscrutability and arbitrariness is framed in the LDS church as opportunity to communicate more fervently with God and to humble one's self to His will, trusting that the purpose for suffering or sadness will made clear at some point. Ultimately, the Mormon God is seen as communicative and knowable. Mormons are encouraged to pray to God regularly with the assurance that He both hears and answers specific, individual prayers. The Holy Ghost, the third member of the godhead, is a kind of divine go-between who relays messages, direction, warning, comfort, and instruction. Mormons believe their God can and does influence every area of their lives on a frequent, regular basis. So this God, a compassionate, attentive, positive, purposeful, communicative Father, is the Transcendent Mormons seek to encounter. Spiritual encounters, more than strange and mysterious, are seen as momentary reunions, experiences in which we feel the uplifting, edifying, instructing, approving presence of our Father in our lives. This is not to say that the Mormon Transcendent is just the goosebumps and sniffles Schrader scoffs at. On the contrary, a Latter-Day Saint Transcendent has the potential to be an inclusive, encompassing experience that can be both the mysterious and unknowable Schraderian concept as well as the warm, fuzzy uplifting paternal reunion. So, as this project progresses and I discuss Dutcher's films enabling audience members to encounter a Mormon Transcendent, specifically what I mean is first, viewers can experience a sense of

awareness that there is a larger, extra-worldly presence at work in the films specifically and in the larger world around them, and second, that this presence creates a variety of sensations such as a sense of divine mystery, as well as sensations of spiritual uplift, positivity, love, acceptance, and reconciliation.

Chapter One

Mormon Context

In choosing Mormon cinema as a subject, it is important to offer some basic context for both the religion and its filmic history. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has been part of the United States' religious, political, and cultural milieu since the religion's founding in 1830. Begun with just six official members, the church now boasts a membership of more than fourteen million. Not only is it one of the fastest-growing religions in the world, it is also one of the few that can be considered to be indigenously "American." It is not a Protestant or reformist religion, but rather is based on the belief that Joseph Smith, an uneducated farm boy from upstate New York, was visited by God and Jesus Christ in the early 1800s and was instructed that no church on the earth was actually divinely sanctioned. According to LDS belief, Smith was the one designated to found and lead "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 1.30).

A History of the Culture

In order to understand the contemporary culture Dutcher depicts, a very truncated bit of history might be helpful. The Mormon church has a tumultuous and colorful past that begins in 1820 when Joseph Smith, a 14 year old New York farm boy, first began reporting that he'd been visited by God and Jesus Christ and had been told by them that no established church on the earth was divinely approved. Ten years later, Smith officially founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and went on to become known among his followers as the "Prophet, Seer, and Revelator." From that very audacious beginning, the church grew in membership and influence as people flocked to its unorthodox and, in many ways, inherently American theology.

Following Smith's murder at the hands of a rifle-wielding mob, Brigham Young eventually became the leader of the Mormons and presided over the church for thirty years. It was during his tenure as President and Prophet that Latter-Day Saints fled to the West following an intense period of persecution that drove them from settlements in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Thought of by non-members as clannish and unsettlingly unified, Mormons were able to act as a bloc when it came to voting, commerce, trade, and social activity. As Peter Wolheim writes, "LDS otherness appears to have been defined around specific points of cultural negotiation and contention. Mormons have been simultaneously feared and envied on the basis of a perceived sense of group cohesion extending to the point of tribal and even conspiratorial tightness" (26). Their communal power was both impressive and frightening to those who weren't members of their world and that fear combined with resentment over Mormon religious views that many thought of as blasphemous. The result was often conflict, intimidation, and sometimes violence.

So, in 1846, led by Young the Mormons trekked west, beyond the borders of what then constituted the United States. Young and his people were, in effect, leaving the country that they felt wouldn't accept them. Upon settling in the Salt Lake valley in 1847, they established their own banks and schools, printed their own currency, and even tried to establish their own written language, a phonetic spelling system commissioned by Brigham Young called the Deseret alphabet.

Since that time, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has been headquartered in Utah, with its initial core spreading as far north as Alberta, Canada and as far south as settlements in northern Mexico. Brigham Young, now thought of as one of America's foremost colonizers, populated much of Utah, Idaho, Arizona, and Nevada by assigning groups of families to basically pick up and go. Families would receive their assignments to found a new settlement

for the church and they were expected to be on the road within a matter of weeks or sometimes days. Young's extensive colonizing is responsible for what is now informally referred to as the Mormon Corridor.

Despite its massive proselyting efforts, the Mormon church spent much of the last century and a half in an isolationist stance to the rest of the world. While sending thousands of white-shirted missionaries across the globe raised the public profile of the church, those same black-nametag sporting men and women were (and are) about the specific business of making more Mormons in the world. While never having anything less than the very best of intentions, the message of the church was still one of implicit otherness.

From the beginning, the Church has preached radical doctrines – that God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost are separate, physical beings; that humans are God's literal spiritual children and, therefore, have the potential to "grow up" to become gods like their divine parent; that the leader of the LDS church, the Prophet, communicates directly with God and Jesus Christ and relays their will to the rest of the world; that there are additional scriptures that amend and correct the Bible; that the dead can be baptized by proxy and "join" the LDS church in the afterlife. Despite its efforts at mainstreaming its public image, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is, at its heart, a radical, revisionist religion that deviates wildly from much of traditional Christianity. While it certainly places Jesus Christ as the savior and son of God front and center in its beliefs, the presence of prophets, additional scripture, and an aggressive proselyting force set the church apart from other Christ-centered religions.

Though the church has often been on the public radar, more regularly than not, that awareness is related to controversy and the more sensational aspects of its practices and doctrines such as polygamy or, more recently, its efforts to combat same-sex marriages in California.

Certainly, the 2012 presidential election and Mitt Romney's prominence in that race brings large amounts of attention to the church and its eccentricities.

However, little attention has been paid to the Church as a cultural entity and even less to the cultural output of the Church or of individual Mormons. Most film academics aren't aware that there is something that can be designated as "Mormon cinema." What few non-Mormons are aware of is that the Latter-Day Saint Church has been involved in producing institutional feature-length films since 1913 when it released *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*, a six-reel, ninety minute silent production that traced the history of the church from Joseph Smith's childhood to the development of modern-day Utah (MacGregor). Over the last century, the LDS church's cinematic efforts have served two main purposes: first, to proselyte and spread the message of the church to the uninitiated in hopes of gaining converts and second, to train and uplift viewers who are already members.

Running simultaneously with the history of institutional LDS film is the story of independent Mormon cinema, films produced by Latter-Day Saints but without the imprimatur of the church itself. This narrative is largely populated by grand intentions and middling-to-no results. The earliest produced example of an independent Mormon film is 1931's *Corianton: A Story of Unholy Love* (North), a Book of Mormon story produced in the extravagant style of early Biblical epics. Though it was based on a popular stage play and promoted heavily throughout Utah and surrounding areas, the Great Depression, legal woes, a poor script, and mediocre performances led to its obscurity. From that point forward, many independent projects were planned but only a few came to fruition, such as *The Mormon Battalion* (Finney 1950) and *Perilous Journey* (Linton 1983). Though filmmakers were almost constantly trying to create a Mormon world on screen independent of the church, as Randy Astle writes, "it would not be

until 2000 that such films would start to be financially viable" ("A History of Mormon Cinema" 56). It was in 2000 when Richard Dutcher released *God's Army*, an explicitly LDS coming-of-age story about a young Mormon man serving a two-year mission for the church in southern California. Completely independent of the institution of the church and released in theaters, the film was both financially and critically successful, and it established that there was a potential market for independently-produced Mormon films. Following the success of *God's Army*, independent Mormon cinema enjoyed a period of productivity and some financial success. Since 2000, Mormon filmmakers have produced dozens of theatrically released LDS themed comedies, melodramas, documentaries, war pictures, and historical romances. Each filmmaker has taken a different approach in addressing the particularity of Mormon experience, doctrine, culture, and spirituality.

The Ground Upon Which

I am a Mormon – doctrinally, culturally, by membership, and by birth. I used to joke with non-Mormon friends when they learned about my religious background that I am "as Mormon as polygamy." In light of scandals concerning actual (non-Mormon) polygamists, I've stopped making those jokes, but the fact remains that, in many ways, I am a prototypical Mormon. My ancestors were white Europeans converted to Mormonism by missionaries in Wales and Sweden. They crossed the Atlantic and trekked from the east coast to the heart of the Utah territory desert because they believed a prophet of God instructed them to do so. My great-great-great grandfather, Henry Grow not only crossed the plains to Utah following persecution in the Midwest but was the architect and superintendent of construction for the unique roof of the Salt Lake Tabernacle, the original home of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. A lifetime Mormon, I was born and raised in southeastern Idaho, which is a major hub of LDS population.

I achieved many of the cultural milestones that make up a kind of ethnic "Mormon-ness." I earned my Eagle scout rank at the age of fourteen, attended all four years of Seminary training in high school, served a two-year mission in the Jackson, Mississippi area, graduated from the church-owned Ricks College, married my wife in the Idaho Falls temple, and have served as a Sunday School teacher for much of my adult life. In terms of all the cultural markers, I am as traditionally Mormon as it gets.

Doctrinally, I embrace the church's essential tenets regarding the purpose of life, the relationship between God and humans, and the reality of divine revelation. I pray and expect to receive answers. I read scripture (including the *Book of Mormon*) and expect to feel directed and enlightened. Despite my admittedly almost cartoonish cultural profile, I am a "practicing Mormon" in the sense that I need the practice. I am one man trying to negotiate his faith while engaging with the world on social, professional, and academic levels. I no more stand as a symbol of or speak for my religion than Mitt Romney, Neil LaBute, Walter Kirn, Joanna Brooks, Terry Tempest Williams, Harry Reid, Steven R. Covey, John Hunstman, J.W. Marriott, Aaron Eckhart, or Steve Young. I acknowledge that my interpretation of film theory is filtered through my Mormonism. Just as importantly, I acknowledge that my interpretation of Mormonism is filtered through my own experiences and education.

Chapter Two

Mormon Spiritual Film Style: Emphases and Intensities

Form AND Content

The key idea that characterizes my vision of a Mormon film style as depicted by Richard Dutcher is that of attempted, intermittent fusion. Rather than the polarized extremity of the Transcendent filmic leanness of Schrader and Bresson versus the bloated, weepy extremity of contemporary Hollywood religious films such as *Fireproof* or *Left Behind*, Dutcher's version of Mormon cinema (the version that seems most fitting and most appropriate for this religion I have known my entire life) is one that borrows, combines, and employs elements from both poles. Rather than just focusing on the form of film and using the technical language of film to evoke a Transcendent experience for the audience and rather than just explicitly depicting the practices, rituals, and language of a specific dogma in hopes of introducing and possibly converting audience members to it, Dutcher's films work to synthesize these different approaches.

Latter-Day Saints believe in a world that is both physical *and* spiritual, and they spend their mortal existences trying to walk the razor-thin line between embracing the spiritual without becoming ascetics while honoring and engaging the physical without becoming hedonistic sensualists. It stands to reason that a film style meant to evoke a Mormon sense of religion and spirituality would attempt to combine both form *and* content in order to convey that worldview. While there is a variety of possible areas of emphasis for this combination, here I focus on two areas of form and two areas of content present within Dutcher's films that reflect an LDS sensibility. I argue that the components of LDS spiritual film style which I will discuss below make up Dutcher's attempt at autoethnography. Autoethnography is a form of research based in the social sciences, primarily anthropology. As ethnography is the study of a discrete subculture

through field observation, data collection, and writing, *auto*ethnography is the study of a subculture to which the researcher personally belongs. It's similar to the difference between an author writing the biography of a person whose life he has researched extensively and writing an autobiography, the events of which he has experienced himself. The difference is, rather than simply writing about biographical events, an autoethnographer attempts to describe the culture to which she belongs, its rituals and values, its artifacts and communication styles. Autoethnography is not just the study of an individual but rather of how an individual experiences and relates to the larger whole to which he belongs.

The sinuous link between the individual and the communal is noted in several definitions of practice. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner offer a succinct summary of autoethnography: "(It is) an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (739). Barbara Tedlock, in her definition of ethnography, also hits on key elements of autoethnograpic study. She points to the personal/cultural connection and also suggests what's to be done with the information once it's gathered: "(It) involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information of data are transformed into a written or visual form. As a result, it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives" (455).

Autoethnographic study and writing is amorphous and can center on any culture to which an author can reasonably defend as a discrete, operating entity. It can be as basic and primal as a family, as common and pedestrian as a workplace environment, as personal and intimate as a

marriage, as far-reaching as a neighborhood or even a state, or as profound as a religion. Every group we belong to as human beings has its own set of rules and expectations, its own body language and verbal shorthand. Each community has different concepts of humor, of what is admirable or despicable, of what is taboo and what is desirable. Autoethnography is the attempt to articulate the links between the group that upholds the expectations of the many and the individual who functions within those expectations. I argue that Dutcher's Mormon quartet is filmic autoethnography, his attempt at taking individual experience and using it to find cultural meaning. Each component of LDS spiritual film style is directly related to the doctrinal beliefs and cultural practices of the western American Latter-Day Saint culture. In making these films, Dutcher isn't just making movies to tell stories. The films reveal, complicate, enrich, and question the culture they depict through the experiences of individuals. Though I won't draw one-for-one comparisons throughout, I do think that characters in each film are spiritual stand-ins for Dutcher's own spiritual progression and questioning.

Form: Spirit and Body Together

The first aspect of this style has to do with the opposition between an ascetic, Schraderian film spirituality and contemporary Hollywood film style and how Mormon doctrine can create a stylistic middle path between the two. By Hollywood film style, I refer both to the standardized "invisible" method of narrative filmmaking developed by mainstream commercial filmmakers from the early days of silent film and perfected during the classical Hollywood period lasting from the late 1920s to the early 1960s, and also I use the term more generally to describe the content and style of many 21st century American commercial movies – specifically, their use of bombastic narrative elements/action set pieces such as fist fights, gun battles, car chases, and

heavily emphasized sex appeal of the actors along with formal elements like the pop or hip hop accompanied montage, rapid fire editing, and the constantly in-motion or handheld camera. First, as David Bordwell argues, the primary changes that have occurred in American filmmaking since the end of the classical period have mostly just served to reinforce the invisible, continuity-enhancing techniques that were developed during classical Hollywood. In other words, Hollywood stylistic techniques are simply more themselves than they have ever been. Bordwell points out, "In representing space, time, and narrative relations (such as causal connections and parallels), today's films generally adhere to the principles are classical filmmaking. Exposition and character development are handled in much the ways they would have been before 1960" (16). Though there have been some tweaks such as variation in ASL (average shot length), greater prevalence of long lenses and fluid camera motion, and tighter framing on dialogue shots, those alterations are simply an intensification of what has already come before. The invisibility of film language, the emphasis on continuity, and the push away from overt formality are all aspects of classical Hollywood style and very much a part of Dutcher's attempted recipe for cinematic fusion.

Of course, Hollywood filmmaking as an industry is contracting at this point. Fewer and fewer films are made each year, but the films that are produced have larger and larger budgets. More modest, mid-budget domestic dramas or family films that might have been produced fifteen years ago are not getting the green light these days in order for more resources to be poured into tentpole blockbuster movies. Because producers want as much of a slam-dunk guaranteed return on their investment as possible, the emphasis on bombastic, eye-popping content and escapist entertainment value increases. Whether it is a more realistic depiction of the Hulk smashing attacking aliens into a skyscraper or a higher degree of lens-flare sunlight

highlighting Megan Fox's cleavage, Hollywood film style also involves a certain amount of spectacular, exploitive content. The tried, true, and now cemented film style articulated by Bordwell, Thompson, and other formalist critics combined with the obvious crowd-pleasing content of contemporary Hollywood films together form a unique combination that influences all modern filmmaking. This influence is as ubiquitous as it is almost banally physical In regards to its ubiquity, not only is it unheard of to create a Hollywood film without the standard continuity-based style of the classical period, but in terms of content, hardly a picture can be made these days without a flourish of the clichéd, over-the-top-ness of 21st century American filmmaking. Even the Old Testament prophet Noah looks like an action star and has to face off with an advancing army armed with hatchets and clubs in Darren Aronofsky's 20014 *Noah*.

So Dutcher in his effort to make a movie that audiences would actually pay to see had to use the traditional invisible, continuity-based cinematic language of American filmmaking but also had to incorporate some of these stylistic elements and content. In terms of their banal physicality, most contemporary Hollywood films made in this loose, as-yet-unnamed style (MTV filmmaking? Michael Bay-ism, perhaps?) attempt to evoke some kind of physical reaction in viewers. Somewhat like the horror, melodrama, and pornography films discussed by Linda Williams in her classic essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," mainstream action, romance, and comedy films produced by Hollywood today are all intended to elicit a kind of puerile emotional/physical buy-in from the viewer by way of explosions, brandished guns, cleavage, jittery camera work, and almost seizure-inducing editing. This kind of, for lack of a better term, lowest-common-denominator filmmaking doesn't even necessarily tap into the primal emotional/physical reactions Williams writes about. The fist-pumping, ear-deafening, eye-strain-inducing, mild arousal-producing style of 21st century Hollywood is extraordinarily

banal. Always in motion, always aimed at excitation of the senses and the dulling of the brain, but always striving to not stir things up too much for fear of profit-damaging controversy, contemporary Hollywood film style wants its viewers in a constant state of excitation with no time to ponder how intellectually, morally, and spiritually empty of an experience it is.

This style and Schrader's vision of an utterly stripped down, silent, inexpressive, almost monastic style are natural opposites. In Schrader's conception of spiritual film style, *everything* is meaningful. Everything is fraught with spiritual significance, from Tarkovsky's billowing wind in the grass to Bresson's light on an empty French field. And viewers are given nothing but seemingly endless amounts of silence and time to contemplate the deep, usually hopeless-for-mankind meaning of it all. However, Mormon beliefs about the nature of God and the potential destiny of people pave the way for a middle road that potentially fuses them. Mormons have clearly defined concepts about the nature of God, their own purpose in life, and what waits for them after death. Each of these concepts involves the unification and perfection of both the physical and the spiritual together.

Mormons believe that physicality is essential to what they call "The Plan of Salvation," which is what they see as God's plan for them to learn, progress, and eventually become like Him. Mormons do not worship an ethereal, disembodied God nor do they believe the afterlife will be spent idly floating around on clouds, singing praises. On the contrary, LDS belief focuses on a physical, embodied, familial God. They worship "a God and a Jesus Christ with bodies, with parts, and with passions" (Brockbank, "The Living Christ"). Mormons believe that gaining a physical body is a crucial step in coming closer to being like God. With a body comes appetites and temptations and, as people go through their life on earth and work on mastering those desires and using them in righteous ways, they become more like their Father in Heaven. Rather than

thinking of their bodies as temporary, sin-riddled necessities to be cast off at the first opportunity, they believe their "soul" is literally composed of both the physical and the spiritual and that the purpose of their lives is to pursue the perfection of both. Our physical bodies are given to us as a stewardship for us to care for while we live on the earth to work and learn. Corporeal existence is seen as a gift and blessing rather than as a miserable curse. The Latter-Day Saint concept of the afterlife involves being resurrected, a state in which "the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame" (*Book of Mormon*, Alma 11.43). Heaven, then, is not the abandonment of the body but rather the perfection of it. The ultimate reward in the Mormon worldview is maintaining and expanding a corporeal existence rather than losing it.

Going along with this idea, the church teaches that Latter-Day Saints who have lived righteous lives and participated in all the necessary ceremonies will maintain their marriage relationships in the afterlife and will be able to continue to expand their families. Such ceremonies are called "saving ordinances" and include baptism and marriage in an LDS temple among others.To my knowledge, Mormonism is the only Christian religion that preaches that righteous living on earth results in the reward of, among other things, continued sexual relationships in Heaven. That attention to the combination spirit and body is a unique trait of Mormon doctrine and one that manifests itself in many ways throughout the church's history and culture.

What I suggest is that the combination of the intangible and invisible with the physical and sensual is the key to a Mormon cinematic style. It makes sense that Mormon film would feature the color, noise, action, and dynamics of a mainstream Hollywood film but twine them with moments of stillness and silence. Filmic elements that viscerally engage a viewer's physical

senses as well as those that cause them to pause form a combination that is a style all its own. The idea that amid life's kineticism and sensual nature, flashes of spirit and divine inspiration appear is highly Mormon.

It is possible that the word *fusion* is not the most accurate choice because it suggests a successful, sustained combining of these two disparate elements. However, while fusion is the ultimate goal, Mormon doctrine teaches that mortal experience is actually a life-long test in which people work to harness and control their physical appetites. The inability to achieve true spiritual and physical fusion (or at least to achieve it in ongoing state) is inherent to the Mormon plan of salvation. We are here to experience life-long trial and error in trying to harness our physical appetites in spiritual pursuits. One example is that Mormons are commanded to avoid all sexual contact beyond innocent kissing and hugging until they are married, preferably in an LDS temple. Once they are married, however, they are encouraged to use sexual intimacy frequently both as a means of procreation and as a way of strengthening marital intimacy. So it isn't as though the physical appetite is bad at all. It's just meant to be controlled and exercised within a circumscribed set of circumstances. One LDS Sunday School lesson explains, "Earth life, though brief, is crucial to us in our quest for eternal life. Here we receive bodies of flesh and bones and are tested in all things. Those who learn obedience and gain self-mastery will return to live with God the Eternal Father" ("The Purpose of Earth Life"). Self mastery is the fusion Latter-Day Saints seek. Mormons are instructed to constantly seek perfect physical and spiritual fusion but with the understanding that, in our mortal existence, perfection simply can't be attained.

As in LDS doctrine, fusion is the ultimate goal of Mormon spiritual film style – the perfect unification and harmony of the sensual and the Transcendent. However, as with Saints'

daily attempts at perfection, the film style's attempts are tentative, half-formed, and sometimes find the two elements working together simply by virtue of appearing in the same film rather than a distinct filmic method of twining them. At times, they are meant to serve as counterpoints to one another, and other times they are actually meant to produce a kind of fusion. Elder Allen's "dark night of the soul" in *God's Army* suggests an attempt at fusion because it rubs up against the earthier near-fist fight that happens in the previous sequence. There is a kind of cause and effect relationship between the two, but ultimately, the scenes are separate and produce interesting friction primarily due to their proximity to one other. On the other hand, the confirmation/assassination sequence in *States of Grace* represents a more cohesive example of how mainstream Hollywood filmmaking form and content might combine with what we think of as a "spiritual" film style. It is a more successful attempt at actually fusing the content and form of 21st century mainstream Hollywood with explicitly dogmatic Mormon content and Schraderian sculptural stillness.

In this way, Dutcher's film style really does echo Mormon spiritual life – a constant attempt at fusion between the two primary components that comprise our existence, a fusion that sometimes meets with more success than other times. In the *Book of Mormon*, we are told that knowledge and, therefore, perfection (or fusion) are cumulative, the result of a process, not a single event: "For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have" (2 Nephi 28.30). Due to the fallen nature of the world in which we live, what Mormons call "the terrestrial world," true perfection and fusion are not

possible in this life. Our faulty physical bodies and limited minds simply won't allow it. What is possible are moments when "the veil is thin" so to speak and we catch glimpses of our potential future perfection.

One real-world, non-filmic analogue I can draw to illustrate this relationship between the physical and spiritual in Mormonism comes from LDS history. Latter-Day Saints are known for building their temples all over the world. Currently, there are 143 operating temples, thirteen under construction, and another fourteen that have been announced, making a total of 170 temples either operational or on the way ("Temples of the Church"). They are the holiest places of worship Mormons have and are open only to Latter-Day Saints who meet the highest standards of purity and obedience. The most famous one is the six-spired Gothic-inspired temple that sits in the heart of downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. Mere days after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young, the church's leader following Joseph Smith's murder, pushed his cane into the sandy desert floor and said, "Here we will build a temple to our God." (Incidentally, this is a scene recreated for the institutional Mormon film about the construction of the temple called *The Mountain of the Lord* (Johnson 1993).) Construction on the temple began immediately, with the cornerstone being laid exactly in the spot where Young planted his cane. This immediacy indicates the primacy of spiritual pursuit in the Latter-Day Saint scheme of things – a temple before shelter, a bank, or a post office. However, it wasn't long after construction began on the temple that Brigham Young himself supervised the building of what was called the Social Hall where dances and theatrical performances were to be held. About the building, Young said, "That is our fun hall, and not a place in which to administer the sacrament. We dedicated it to the purpose for which it was built. … You know what spirit attends that room. There we have had governors, judges, doctors, lawyers, merchants, passers-by, etc, who did not belong to our

church, and what has been the universal declaration of each and every one? 'I never felt so well before in all my life at any party as I do here;' and the Saints do not feel as well in any other place of amusement. … Every thing in its time, and every thing in its place" (qtd. "Happiness and Social Enjoyment").The prophet's insistence that the Saints needed a dance hall as much as they needed a temple is indicative of Mormonism's unique relationship between the physical and the spiritual. It is significant that the two separate buildings coexist (still) together in the same city, and Latter-Day Saints faithfully attended both. Like the appreciation of the physical and the pursuit of the spiritual in LDS doctrine and practice, both buildings make up a part of the greater whole of the prototypical Mormon city. It is this relationship, fraught with negotiations and seeming inconsistencies, that Dutcher's efforts at stylistic counterpoint and fusion embody a style that can be considered inherently Mormon.

Hollywood bombast and sentiment combined with a kind of Schraderian sculptural stillness might be a major component of what a Mormon film style looks like. A film like Dutcher's *Brigham City* features the drama and familiar tropes of a police procedural, but, amid the *CSI* style investigation of a murder scene, the camera comes to a halt, framing the motionless sheriff in the center of the screen as he takes photos of a corpse, the only sound being the clicking of a shutter and the hum of flies. The shot resembles a religious icon and is not like any shot before it or after. This moment of stillness and contemplation rests amid sirens, blood stains, and subplots – a moment suggesting another world productively and purposefully coexisting and, at times, intertwining with our own.

Form: Light and Spirit

Another preoccupation of LDS culture and doctrine that manifests itself within Mormon film is maintaining the companionship of the Holy Ghost. Latter-Day Saints believe that when

they are baptized and then confirmed a member of the Church (a process that involves full immersion and then the laying on of hands by members of the church's priesthood) that they then have access to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, the intangible yet equally powerful and important member of the Godhead (the Mormon version of the Trinity – God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost, each one a separate entity but all equal in power and intent.) The companionship is conditional, however, and can only be maintained through obedience to the commandments and standards of the LDS church. Church leaders from the President/Prophet down to the most average Sunday School teacher emphasize the importance of "keeping the Spirit." The standardized weekly Sacrament prayers offered in every Mormon meetinghouse from Boise to Berlin asks for those who partake of the bread and water to "always have His spirit to be with them." Articles in the Church-sponsored youth magazine *The Friend* regularly tell stories of young people struggling with difficult situations who pray and listen to the "still small voice" that offers the solution to their problems. Mormons believe that God is interested in every aspect of their lives – their work, their families, their social situations – and that He will provide guidance for how to live and interact in ways that will provide the most peace, the most happiness. For Mormons, that guidance most often comes through the influence of the Holy Ghost or The Spirit. Often this relationship between church members and the Holy Ghost is explained through a metaphor of light.

It is here where a filmic element comes into play. While using light symbolically is hardly new in cinema, in Mormon film, that symbolism has a specific doctrinal significance. In certain moments throughout Mormon films, specifically Dutcher's films, the presence or absence of light is specifically tied to the spiritual connectedness of major and minor characters. A faithful, obedient missionary who dies during his time of service is carried by his pallbearers out

of the darkness into the almost-blinding light of a Los Angeles afternoon. Conversely, a disobedient, apostate missionary who leaves his mission early because he has lost his faith disappears into the waiting darkness outside a bleak California bus station. Another character explains his lack real commitment to his efforts as a member of the church all while an ocean pier Ferris wheel blinks and flickers in the background over his shoulder, like a light bulb only half in its socket, like the spiritual connection that is faltering in the man. Mormon filmmakers, Dutcher in particular, demonstrate the LDS preoccupation with connecting with God through the Holy Ghost through the constant use of light as a metaphor. To use light and dark as spiritual symbols is nothing new, but to examine how the emphases and intensities of Mormon belief manifest themselves onscreen, it's important to look at that use, even if it's tried and true in mainstream Hollywood.

Content: The Salvific Effect of Violence

Devin McKinney writes about "strong violence," depictions that have consequences that make viewers pay for their viewing experience. That is to say, McKinney sees "strong violence" as a depictions that feels "physically real [and] emotionally complex: it bring[s] up ambivalences and dreads that no amount of rationalization [can] overcome" (99). He argues that strong violence resists quantification and "weak" violence yields itself to "patterns and predictabilities" (99). McKinney also claims that violence with ramifications is a defining element: "As much as anything, it is this grasp of consequence that distinguishes strong violence from weak" (101). McKinney also invokes religious language when he writes about the "fear and mystery" of strong film violence and about how it "enables – and often entails – shifts in one's moral positioning" (100, 106). Here we see a scholar giving religious power to the cinematic experiences. Traditionally, concepts of morality and moral positioning come from religious or

spiritual sources. (This is not to say that religion is the only source of morality or that only religious people can moral. Rather, it is to say that even if individuals form their moral landscapes *in spite of* religion, their worlds are still just as shaped by the codes or traditions they reject.) McKinney stresses that film violence has the capacity to have a greater meaning than just serving as hip, obnoxious set pieces. He suggests that empathy is a key goal to the use of violence in cinema: "The reclamation of that same empathy and receptivity is a project as old as human history, and when a film artist makes us cry over spilt blood it can start to seem like the project is worth it" (109). It's not just the occasional use of religious language that makes the connection between violence, film, and religion. On the contrary, it is the recurring idea that seeing violence enacted on screen is somehow a transformative ritual that draws viewers nearer to their "ultimate concern" or the Transcendent. Of course, identification is the key to strong violence. When audience members are positioned to identify with either the victims or perpetrators of violence, they have the opportunity to experience the cost of being either on the giving or receiving end of it. Empathy, for better or for worse, is the name of the game with violence that matters in film.

Vivian Sobchack writes that contemporary movies with their blood and violence "merely reflect our search for meaning and significance – for order – in the essentially senseless" (117). The search for meaning, the desire for an orderly universe – again, we see how cinema and religion can conflate. Sobchack goes on to write, "the very presence of random and motiveless violence on the screen elevates it, creates some kind of order and meaning from it; accident becomes Fate" (118). Film, specifically film violence, has the capacity to elevate and create meaning where there is none.

S. Brent Plate links film and religion through what he calls "worldmaking," writing, "religion and film are akin. They both function by recreating the known world then presenting that alternative version of the world to their viewers/worshippers. [They] each create alternative worlds utilizing the raw materials of space and time and elements, bending each of them in new ways and forcing them to fit particular standards and desires" (*Religion and Film* 1-2). If a religion's doctrine and history are tightly woven with violence, does it stand to reason that films by, for, or about that religion would reflect that world? That one kind of worldmaking would mimic the other? In the case of Mormon cinema, the answer is no and yes.

To most, the idea that violence is inherent to the doctrine and culture of the Mormon church probably seems laughable. Generally speaking, mainstream American Mormons are viewed as clean-scrubbed, smiling, Donny-and-Marie types who are more likely to bring cookies to your door or volunteer for disaster relief efforts than to consider hurting a fly. This image has been lampooned in popular culture in episodes of *South Park* and *Frasier*, in films such as *Orgazmo* and *Millions*, and others. However, while this image obviously doesn't take into account the complexity, diversity, or humanity of an organization with nearly 15 million members, it also fails to acknowledge the prominence of war, murder, death, and dismemberment in Mormonism.

The Book of Mormon, the central sacred text of the Latter-Day Saints, is fraught with beheadings, impalings, beatings, rivers running red with blood following tribal warfare, whole regions spoiled by piles of rotting bodies left after wars, and an assortment of other forms of death.

Historically, Joseph Smith, the founder and foremost figurehead of the early church, was tarred and feathered, beaten, and starved due to his claims of personal revelation, visions, and

new scripture. Smith's short life ended at age 36 when an anti-Mormon mob stormed the jail where he was incarcerated and shot him to death. Even after he was dead, mobbers propped his body against a stone well and continued to pump bullets into it. This event galvanized members of the church at the time and is often recounted in the contemporary church as an example of Smith's commitment to the church he founded. Church authorities often emphasize how Smith "sealed his testimony with his own blood."

Early members of the church were tarred and feathered, beaten, shot, stabbed, whipped, and raped at various times as they were persecuted and driven from state to state. 17 members of the church cornered in a riverside mill were shot to death by a Missouri militia group in what is known in the church as the "Haun's Mill Massacre." The dead included a 9 year old boy, a 10 year old boy, and a 78 year old man.

At times, members of the church were also on the other side of the rifle so to speak. Once they fled the United States entirely and settled in the Utah territory, a group of possibly church-sanctioned, possibly renegade Mormons attacked an immigrant wagon train, members of which they believed were responsible for some of the persecution Saints experienced prior to fleeing the country. It's estimated that nearly 120 people were killed by vengeful Mormons.

Violence and Mormonism have also come into the public spotlight through Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* and Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*.

Of course, none of this is to say that Mormonism as a culture or Latter-Day Saints as individuals have a corner on the market of religion-related violence. The Catholic church, for one, has a centuries-long history of being both victim and aggressor. It is the unlikeliness of Mormon violence that is fascinating. However, rather than simply being an interesting paradox or a series of historical facts, the combination of Mormonism and violence is actually deeply

intertwined in LDS doctrine. Any Christian-based faith is going to have an emphasis on Christ's suffering and crucifixion. Being a Christian denomination, the LDS church also has this emphasis but focuses on it with a specific purpose. Rather than focusing on the violence seemingly for its own sake (as one might argue is the case in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*), Mormonism focuses on the relationship between violence and the resultant salvation. Violence creates the space in which salvation occurs.

Despite the prominence of violence in the church's history and doctrine, institutional Mormon film has always been notoriously bloodless both figuratively and literally. Not only is violence usually not even part of their narrative equation, other "rough edges" of human experience such as sex, vulgar language, and other "R-rated" elements are eliminated – even when the film may call for them. (High schoolers in a devotional film for teenagers are all clean-cut and even "the bad kids" use clean language and only talk about Mormon-taboo behavior like smoking, drinking, or having sex before marriage.) When violence does figure in to institutional films, it generally takes place off screen and its results are superficial at best. (In *The Mountain of the Lord*, a historical epic portraying the 40 year process of constructing the Salt Lake City temple, a stone mason has his hand blown off with dynamite in a quarry. The explosion takes place off camera and the man is only shown much later, lying in a bed, a sheet shrouding any real evidence of his injuries.) In its insistence on being universally palatable, institutional Mormon film fails to recognize and reflect a key element of the church's own doctrine and history. By removing what Devin McKinney would call "strong violence," the films are robbed of the possibility of real redemption. The worldmaking of "official" Mormon film does not reflect the actual world of Latter-Day Saint belief.

However, as was discussed earlier, there is more than one vein of Mormon film. Though institutional Mormon film doesn't fully reflect the world of its own history, culture, and doctrine, Richard Dutcher's independent films manage to achieve more faithful and complete LDS worldmaking. In his films, Dutcher deals with the seeming necessity of physical violence in the obtaining of grace or redemption. In his Mormon quartet, this concept figures in again and again in a cause-and-effect relationship. Moments of intense violence, both on screen and off, are always followed by the offering of some form of redemption to those involved. The circumstances of the violence and the form of salvation differs from film to film but the pattern is constant. In this sense, violence plays a role both in the content and the form of Dutcher's films. Certainly, acts of violence play a major thematic role in offering protagonists opportunities, rough as they may be, to confront and hopefully reconcile with a God who has either placed them or allowed them to place themselves in harm's way. But the structure of the films, the camera work, film editing, and sound editing of these violent encounters play as much of a role in the form of the film as the content. Viewers are meant to identify with the protagonist who is either the victim or perpetrator of these violent acts and, therefore, are intended to experience the same salvific or damning moments as them. As the intensity and graphicness of the violence in Dutcher's films increase from film to film, so too does the viscerality with which it is filmed. Violence quietly described by a character in front of a stationary camera gives way, eventually over the course of four films, to a roaming handheld lens actually spattered with blood as a character is bludgeoned with a brick. As viewers, we are experiencing violence by proxy, as vicarious participants. This is very appropriate as Mormons are firm believers in the efficacy of vicarious experience through their temple ordinances in which people are baptized in place of their dead relatives who didn't have the opportunity to be baptized into the church while living.

Vicarious experience is a major tenet of Latter-Day Saint belief. It stands to reason that a film made in the Mormon style would enable its viewers to participate in something as inherently woven into the church's history and doctrine as violence and its attendant relationship to salvation.

I'm most interested in exploring is his use of violence as a method of creating salvific space for his characters and how that treatment of violence and salvation mimics Mormon doctrine and history. Each of Dutcher's first four films are stories of the necessity of salvation and the role of violence in the process of trying to attain it. Hollywood is full of secular redemption stories and certainly traditional Christian films focus heavily on being spiritually "saved" but in Dutcher's movies, his characters only reach a place of mental/emotional/spiritual clarity and redemption after violent acts. It is this relationship that, along with the overt content, makes Dutcher's films inherently Mormon. His films reflect both the cultural history and doctrine of the Latter-Day Saint Church. This content-related departure from and, some would argue, improvement upon institutional LDS film are inherent parts of an LDS spiritual film style.

Content: The Power of the Priesthood Ordinances

One final area of emphasis that is central to the LDS church and to my concept of an LDS spiritual film style is the centrality of Priesthood ordinances. One aspect that sets the Mormon church apart from most other Christian denominations is its well-developed belief surrounding the idea of Divine sanction. Mormons believe that through a series of visions and divine visitations, Joseph Smith was invested with the authority to establish and operate the same organization that Christ founded during his mortal ministry. The idea is that Christ's official authority was lost from the earth following his crucifixion and the eventual death of all the

original apostles. Church leaders teach that the Priesthood authority and many of Christ's basic teachings were lost or warped over the centuries, and that eventually, a restoration was necessary. The Priesthood was restored to Joseph Smith who then passed it on to other members of the church. Any modern Mormon can track the line connecting his Priesthood authority back to Joseph Smith and, therefore, Jesus Christ. (My father ordained me to the Priesthood, his father ordained him, an early apostle named Richard Lyman ordained Grandpa, etc.)

The official church website defines it this way: "The word *priesthood* has two meanings. First, priesthood is the power and authority of God. It has always existed and will continue to exist without end. Through the priesthood, God created and governs the heavens and the earth. Through this power, He exalts His obedient children, bringing to pass 'the immortality and eternal life of man'" ("Priesthood"). The Priesthood authority then is the both the right and ability to do and to act as Christ himself would if he were present.

While there is much emphasis in the church placed on the sorts of "unofficial" acts in Christ's name such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and generally helping those who can't help themselves, the "official" acts that the Priesthood is specifically employed for are usually what are called Priesthood ordinances. Again, the church website (a slick, extensive site designed for both the seasoned member and the curious novice) offers an explanation of the term:

> "In the Church, an ordinance is a sacred, formal act performed by the authority of the priesthood. Some ordinances are essential to our exaltation. These ordinances are called saving ordinances. They include baptism, confirmation, ordination to the Melchizedek Priesthood (for men), the temple endowment, and the marriage sealing. With each of these ordinances, we enter into solemn covenants with the Lord. Other ordinances, such as naming and blessing children, consecrating oil, and administering to the sick and afflicted, are also performed by priesthood authority. While they are not essential to our salvation, they are important for our comfort, guidance, and encouragement. Ordinances and covenants help us remember who we are. They remind us of our duty to God. The

Lord has provided them to help us come unto Him and receive eternal life. When we honor them, He strengthens us spiritually" ("Ordinances").

To members of the church, Priesthood ordinances are links between the temporal world and Heaven. Whatever is enacted through one is considered permanent. Someone who is married through a Priesthood ordinance, for instance, would still be married in the afterlife. Latter-Day Saint scripture tells us that "whatsoever [a Priesthood holder] shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever he shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (D&C 124.93).

Given the centrality of this belief, it stands to reason that any film style attempting to evoke a Mormon sense of the Transcendent must incorporate Priesthood ordinances somehow. Richard Dutcher's Mormon quartet films are the only traditional narrative movies outside of institutional LDS work to depict or address them in any significant way. Ordinances, specifically, baptisms, confirmations, blessings of healing and comfort, and the blessing and passing of the Sacrament, find their way into each one of the four films and not just in tangential ways. The efficacy (or in the case of *Falling*, the ineffectuality) of Priesthood ordinances, that temporal and eternal sealing power, is essential to the plot and character development of each film.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the centrality of Priesthood ordinances in the church, Dutcher's use of them has met with some opposition. The reaction of some Latter-Day Saints to his depictions can be summed up in by a letter to the editor of *The Daily Universe*, the campus newspaper at Brigham Young University following the release of *God's Army*. In that film, a climactic Priesthood blessing is given to a disabled man who is unable to walk. Due to the faith of both the man and the LDS Priesthood-holding missionary who administers the blessing, a healing takes place and the man is enabled to walk. This depiction of a beginning-to-end Priesthood blessing of healing was off-putting for Brett Spjut, a BYU student at the time. He

wrote "What really bothered me was that the films shows a priesthood blessing being administered to a sick man. Is this not casting pearls before swine? The power to act in God's name should be treated most sacred. Why does that sacred ordinance have to show up on the big screen at a public theater?" ("Letter"). Spjut's comments are typical of what many Mormons felt at the time *God's Army* was released. Why is this man depicting sacred things in the lowly, common medium of film?

If the purpose of a spiritual film style is to evoke an encounter with the Transcendent, and if, as I posit, there is no universal Transcendent but rather only different, specific versions of it, a Mormon spiritual film style must reflect a Latter-Day Saint's idea of both what the Divine is and how the Divine would reach out. Priesthood ordinances to Mormons are like bridges between two distant but related islands – they are a primary source of connection and communication. A film trying to evoke a Mormon sense of the Divine without somehow incorporating Priesthood ordinances would be like trying to get a sense of what it's like to travel around New York without using any of the bridges.

All Things Denote There Is a God

These formal and content-related elements all combine to create an encounter with the Mormon divine. They create a location in which a viewer can experience an LDS sacred moment. These elements dovetail both with the Mormon doctrine that God's influence is interwoven throughout the entire world and Mircea Eliade's concept of theophany, which is "the act of manifestation of the sacred" (qtd. Bird 3). The entire LDS church is built on the idea that God manifested himself in person, on earth, to Joseph Smith. Mormons go to work, to school, to their homes, hoping and expecting to have God's influence manifested to them in concrete, identifiable ways. Mormons believe that literally "all things denote there is a God; yea, even the

earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (Alma 30.44). It only makes sense that any serious film by, for, our about Mormons would somehow address this worldview and make an attempt at conveying a LDS holy experience.

Randy Astle argues that, for Mormons, the movie screen can be something other than a formalist frame, a realist window, or a structuralist mirror. Instead, he recognizes that the LDS worldview can make even a mall multiplex theater a holy place and suggests that the screen be looked at as "a veil, a similarly flat field which can occasionally be parted – not by the filmmaker or the viewer but by a third party, in Mormonism's case the Holy Spirit – to reveal truths and realities that cannot be presented on screen" ("The World Through a Veil"). The image of a parted veil is a powerful one in LDS culture. It sums up much of the Mormon worldview – our lives in this temporal world take place just on the other side of a veil, an intangible, invisible barrier that separates us from God, Jesus, the Devil, and the spirits of those who either haven't come to earth yet or those who have already come and passed back over to the other side. Often when members of the church have spiritual experiences, one may remark that "the veil was very thin" at that moment, suggesting that the spiritual world was very close and connected to the temporal world. It makes sense for Mormons, who believe that all things have the potential to be sites for spiritual enlightenment, that the movie screen can be a veil to be parted.

Particularly prior to the advent of VHS, DVD, and digital technology, the similarities and nexuses between film and religion were obvious. People entering a specialized, dedicated space and facing forward toward a shared area of focus from which light (metaphorical or actual) pours forth could be a description of church or it could mean the local movie theater.

I believe that Richard Dutcher's Mormon quartet offers the best sample of what the beginnings of an LDS spiritual film style might look like.

Chapter Three

Richard Dutcher: Mormon/Filmmaker

The shape of Richard Dutcher's story has changed over the years. When he was first a passionate wunderkind of filmmaking, the so-called "Godfather of Mormon cinema," his story was a recognizable one in LDS culture: the convert who came from a rough background who, though hard work and faithfulness, came to touch the lives of church members across the world. It's familiar narrative that members of the church attach to everyone from former President of the Church Howard W. Hunter to Motown singer and late-in-life convert to Mormonism Gladys Knight.

Early Life: Mister Dutcher Goes to Provo

At least initially, Dutcher's life follows this pattern. His mother's family was Pentecostal and his father's family was Baptist. However, at the age of 8, after the marriage between his mother and biological father disintegrated, he became a member of the church when his mother remarried a practicing Mormon named Harold Dutcher. "My mother married this Mormon guy, and it was like, 'Well, we're going to be Mormons now," Dutcher explains (Moring). This casual beginning became more impassioned and meaningful as he grew older and began to study LDS history and doctrines. When he was sixteen, his family moved to the Salt Lake area where he began acting in community plays, among them some semi-professional productions at the Salt Lake landmark theater the Promised Valley Playhouse.

After high school, Dutcher attended Brigham Young University for one year before serving a full-time mission for the church in southern Mexico. Dutcher says, unlike many Mormons, he didn't seek out BYU on the basis that it was owned by the LDS church. His motivations were more practical. "I had had a lot of offers. University of Utah, Utah State. But

BYU offered the biggest scholarships, so I went to BYU not out of any religious loyalty. It was just pure greed" ("Richard Dutcher: A Filmmaker's Journey"). Following his eventful two-year mission to the Vera Cruz area of Mexico (a stint that included being arrested and jailed for proselytizing in an area off-limits to foreign ministers), Dutcher finished his service and returned to BYU and continued with his education while pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Film. At BYU, Dutcher was frustrated with the lack of informed, practical instruction when it came to actually making movies. At the time, a student could graduate with a degree in film without actually making a film of any kind. Dutcher responded to this toward the end of his time there by checking out the free equipment from the university, raising about 3,500 dollars from friends and relatives, hiring actors and a crew, and producing a ten-minute short film called *Brother John*. In addition to writing the script and directing the film, he also did all the sound and film editing himself in the lab at BYU ("Richard Dutcher: A Filmmaker's Journey"). Dutcher credits the BYU film program with giving him a solid footing in the history and criticism of film and for introducing him to many films and filmmakers he wouldn't otherwise have known, but ultimately it was his self-taught experience with *Brother John* that galvanized him into a filmmaker.

Dutcher also followed the familiar and well-trod path of meeting and marrying his wife while still in school. (It's a cultural cliché among Mormons that people attend church-owned schools simply to find a compatible marriage partner.) Dutcher met Gwen Yuill and co-starred with her in production of *The Foreigner* in 1988 (Robinson). Eventually, the two would have seven children together, all born or adopted over the course of Dutcher's ascent from out-of-work actor in Hollywood to successful independent filmmaker.

Post-BYU: Learning What Not To Do

After graduating from BYU, Dutcher and his wife moved to Los Angeles where he had a series of low-paying jobs that enabled him to continue writing screenplays and go to auditions. Gwen got a job as a master sculptor for Disney and created porcelain figurines based on animated characters. Dutcher eventually realized his "big break" wasn't going to come and that he needed to create it for himself. Following the pattern he used to make Brother John, Dutcher wrote a script called Girl Crazy and set about getting it made. Essentially a romantic comedy about a man in love with multiple women in the same apartment complex, Dutcher himself has labeled it as "fluff" (Robinson). Dutcher writes of the experience, "I learned what to do. I learned what not to do. Most of all, I learned that I would never again risk so much and give so much of my life to something so trivial. After *Girl Crazy*, I decided that, in the future, if I ever had the chance to make another film, I would make a film that would mean something, that would make a difference" ("Bio").

Fluffy though it may have been, it took five years and 50,000 dollars of borrowed money and maxed-out credit cards to get it made. The entire film was made in the apartment complex the Dutcher's lived in and managed. The finished product was eventually sold to HBO but not for enough to recoup production costs. In seeking out the significantly higher profits that would have come from international sales, his career came into conflict with his religion. He was told the film needed to feature nudity about every seven or eight minutes to be successful. As a faithful member of a church that discourages its members from even seeing rated-R movies much less making them, Dutcher felt at an impasse.

> "It was at that moment that I wondered what am I doing here. I knew I wasn't going to do that. I walked out really in despair. I thought there is no way I can be LDS and be a

successful filmmaker. It was a real turning point. I thought I was going to have to give it up. I had come to a place where I had to choose. I knew the formula (for a successful movie) by then. I even had the film in my head that if I made it I would have everything I needed — recognition and money. Then suddenly you have a career. . . I was lying in bed one night and saw where I was heading and it wasn't a good place. I was really going down the wrong path. I wasn't being true to the kid. These weren't my stories; I was just responding to the market" (Robinson).

The *God's Army* Epiphany and the Birth of 21ˢᵗ Century Independent Mormon Cinema

Dutcher has told the story of his epiphanic moment in several different venues. It is something of a typical "aha" moment, but it's interesting in the way it reflects the Mormon idea that because God is in all things, inspiration can come at any time and in any place. The moment when Dutcher shifted from struggling movie guy to future Godfather of Mormon cinema came when he was barbequing hamburgers on his back porch in Los Angeles. He had a copy of the *L.A. Times* open to the movie section and was glancing at it as he cooked. He saw there were four gay-themed films opening in L.A. just that weekend and the concept of niche filmmaking came into sharp view. He wondered,

> "Why can't Mormons do the same thing? Each film doesn't have to be for the whole world. Just appeal to enough people to get your money back. Even if only LDS liked the films, that's enough. It was so clear. It was as if someone shook me. I sat at the picnic table and started to work it out. Up to that point I was writing mainstream stuff. I wondered what kind of story can I tell as a Mormon that no one else can tell. It was a totally new place" (Robinson).

It was a moment in which, for Dutcher, the "veil" was thin and he felt connected to ideas, knowledge, and inspiration that were beyond his own immediate grasp. At that moment, Dutcher remembered parts of the same speech I mentioned in my introduction, the one given by Spencer W. Kimball who was President and Prophet of the LDS church from 1973 to 1985. Dutcher noticed in particular that Kimballs mentions Mormon film and says "Such masterpieces should run for months in every movie center, cover every part of the globe in the tongues of the people, written by great artists, purified by the best critics" and that "our writers, our motion picture

specialists, with the inspiration of heaven, should tomorrow be able to produce a masterpiece which would live forever" (Kimball).

Suddenly, Dutcher had a sense of purpose that he had lacked while making *Girl Crazy*. He retooled his approach to films he wanted to make and, instead of aiming for mainstream audiences, he instead began concocting inherently Mormon narratives. His original idea was a Western set in Nauvoo, Illinois in the 1840s as Mormons were beginning the migration west. Finding that it was too expensive of an idea for investors to buy into, Dutcher envisioned a modern-day story of young LDS missionaries working in Los Angeles. He wrote the script, began raising funds, and set the production in motion. *God's Army*, his first theatrically released film, centered around Elder Brandon Allen and Elder Marcus Dalton, two missionaries serving in Los Angeles. The 2000 film was made for about 300,000 dollars and grossed approximately 2.5 million dollars. It was unabashedly Mormon in its content and characters and was an example of a philosophy articulated by Dutcher following the film's release: "I don't feel at all shy about confessing an artistic agenda. I'm not out to convert the world, but it is my intention to open myself up through my work and let the rest of humanity see the world through my Mormon eyes. If they liked the way the world looks through those eyes, great. Welcome aboard. If they don't, that's fine too. At least we've communicated. They know me better and understand me better, and hopefully they know and understand Mormonism better as well" (Bigelow 11).

A large part of the appeal of *God's Army* was watching the fish-out-of-water missionaries trying to do their work in Hollywood of all places. By any independent film standards, the film was a great financial success and, perhaps more importantly, it established the possibility of a viable market for movies made by, for, and about members of the LDS faith. While a film school had been in operation at the church-owned Brigham Young University for decades, 2000 was the

year young Mormon filmmakers saw the possibility of doing something creative with their faith that didn't involve working directly for the church. The contemporary Mormon cinema movement was born and Richard Dutcher was widely seen as its godfather.

By this time, Dutcher had relocated from California to Mapleton, Utah, a small Mormon community nestled against the foothills of the Wasatch mountain range about fifty miles south of Salt Lake. While in post-production for *God's Army*, Dutcher left Mapleton one morning to drive to L.A. On his way out of town, he glanced at the old fashioned wooden gazebo in the Mapleton's city park and idly thought that it would be a good set piece for a film, possibly a murder mystery. By the time he reached Los Angeles, he had several pages of script already composed for what would eventually become his second feature, *Brigham City*. Wanting to strike while the iron was hot and while he was flush with profit from *God's Army*, Dutcher immediately began plowing his money into his second feature. Using Mapleton and the mountains of Utah as his backdrop, he crafted a serial killer/police procedural set in a fictionalized version of the titular town.

In the 2001 film *Brigham City*, the protagonist, Wes Clayton, is both the county sheriff where the unsettling series of murders takes place and also a Mormon bishop or lay minister. The film raises questions about the culture of the Mormon Corridor states (Idaho, Utah, Arizona) where religious power is often conflated with civic authority and influence. Darker in content than *God's Army* and much closer to home for his central audience (Mormon corridor-dwelling Latter-Day Saints), *Brigham City* fell just short of breaking even on its million dollar budget. Widely seen as artistically successful and certainly a powerful meditation on Mormon ideas about redemption, forgiveness, and Latter-Day Saint conceptions of being an "insider" versus an "outsider," the film was perhaps too dark and challenging for an audience which, at the time, was

beginning to get a steady diet of cheaply produced, poorly written farcical Mormon-themed comedies like *Singles Ward* (Hale, 2002).

In 2005 Dutcher released his most ambitious, most accomplished, most expensive, and least attended film so far, *States of Grace*. Returning to the southern California mission grounds of *God's Army*, the film follows the lives of five people affected by a drive-by shooting. Two of the characters, Mormon missionaries, struggle with ideas of faith and works, obeying the spirit of the law or the letter of the law, and with the concepts of grace and forgiveness. The film addresses its subject matter in deeply serious manner and doesn't flinch from the various dark possibilities available in the character's lives. In an op-ed piece published in the online version of Brigham Young University's campus newspaper, Julie Espinosa described the often-heard negative synopsis of the film: "Maybe you've heard third-hand reviews decrying *States of Grace* because it depicts suicide, illicit love, gangbangers and struggling missionaries. A lot of people have written it off based on such cursory criticism." Since the film's release, Dutcher has given slightly contradictory accounts of its financial success. In one interview he claimed, "We have had zero real income on the film. Everything we've taken in has just gone back to paying for what we've had to spend just to promote it. We need to sell a heck of a lot of DVDs just to come near breaking even, which is what, at a minimum, we are hoping to do" (Wotherspoon 68). Later, in a message on a Mormon-themed blog, he wrote, "Even my lowest-grossing film, *States of Grace*, made $200,000.00 at the box office. True, that's less than 1/10 of what *God's Army* grossed, but still…most independent filmmakers would kill (or, at least, maim) for a $200,000.00 theatrical gross" (*Common Consent*). The film overall was reviewed very positively but disappeared quickly from theaters and was seen, at least comparatively, as a financial flop.

Loss of Faith

In September of 2003, during pre-production of *States of Grace,* Dutcher's own spiritual journey took an unexpected turn.

"Basically, it was an answer to a prayer. I had gotten to a point where I knew enough about church history and church doctrines. And I was seeing a real discrepancy. I always felt like I was one of the church's best apologists because I could come up with an answer for anything. There wasn't a problem in the church I didn't have an answer for. The church was like this big construct in my mind. There were parts that weren't finished yet, but it was all holding together pretty well. There were some problems but the whole thing was still generally holding together pretty well. But I got to this point where I wondered 'Do I align myself more with the teachings of original Mormonism or do I align myself more with the church as it is today?' And despite what people will say, anybody who knows anything about church history and doctrine knows the church of 2010 is dramatically different than the church of 1843. . . I got to that point and my commitment was really to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and that whole era, the whole restoration idea. I was seeing things I didn't understand. How did the Restoration evolve? It was becoming quite the opposite of the Restoration of all things. As soon as Brigham Young died, it was like 'Let's get rid of this stuff as fast as we can!' So it was the opposite of restoration. And yet maybe there was some kind of divine purpose in that, so I was willing to go with that.

"But I was at the point when I was praying to get serious answers, and I was praying in every way that we are taught to pray. I was a serious temple goer. I prayed in the True Order of Prayer, the pedestrian order or whatever you call it of prayer. I was praying in every way possible to get answers. . . And I was willing to go anywhere, to do anything. Honestly, I was to the point where if I had received an answer that I was to be a fundamentalist and that the Lord wanted me to take another couple of wives and knowing that would destroy my marriage or whatever, I was still willing. I wanted to do whatever God wanted me to do, whatever that was. That's the point I was at for a long period of time. And I was living as close to the Mormon ideal as I could. I was as good, honest, moral, and upright as I could be. . .

"So I'm in this phase and I'm praying. And then it was the oddest, most unexpected thing. Truly unexpected. It was after prayer and after some scripture study and I was sitting in my room, sitting in my bed, pondering some things, thinking about everything. And for whatever reason, I just asked myself – and I think it was the first time I had ever sincerely asked myself this question since I was fourteen years old . . . I just asked myself, 'Well, what if it's not true?' And it was a sincere question and in my mind I was open to whatever the answer may be. I wondered what if it wasn't true, and by that I meant everything: Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, the Restoration. I opened myself to that question and the most unprecedented thing happened. I had always heard people talk in church about hearing a voice and I didn't understand that. I hadn't had anything like that. And because of my Mormon instruction, I was expecting to be getting something from the outside. A voice from the outside, an angel or something but it was supposed to come from the outside. I heard a voice but it was my own voice and I had never heard it before. It was from the very deepest part of me, the most pure, fundamental part of me. The answer was, 'Of course, it's not true.'

I instantly recognized this was not something from the outside, this was me. . . and I'd never heard anything so clearly. . . And as soon as I'd heard that, it was instantaneous. Suddenly, this entire construct I'd had in my mind just instantly started to come down. I instantly understood that all the problems I was having, this one answer answered every problem,

everything that didn't make sense, every problem. It was the answer. 'Of course, it's not true.' And I knew that. I don't know how long I'd known that. I don't know how long I'd been carrying that around but in the deepest part of me, I knew it. It was absolutely and instantly the most terrifying moment of my life. I went from ten seconds before being a true believer to that moment knowing absolutely nothing and that everything I believed and knew about the universe, about my life, about existence, the world, everything was gone. And I knew nothing. Absolutely nothing. The way I've described it to the few people I've talked to about it is this – and maybe I'm just a visual person – but you know those science fiction movies where two spaceships disengage and one of them just starts to drift away? Natural forces pull them away? That's what it felt like. It felt like a piece of me was leaving and that it would only get farther away and I would never get it back. And that was my belief – or my faith, I guess people would say. It was more, I think, my belief because I still retain faith, just not my belief in Mormonism.

"So that's basically what happened. And it's such an internal thing but such a powerful thing. . . The way it would describe it is it's just like when Joseph Smith came in from the woods and told his mother, "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.' I learned for myself at that moment that Mormonism is not true. As I say that, I want to clarify that I'm not making some universal pronouncement or statement. This is the way I believe. . . This is my point of view. And I could be wrong. That's one thing I learned, a real humility about my beliefs, because I believed so firmly and now I believe so firmly that it's not true" ("Richard Dutcher: A Filmmaker's Journey").

I include this long transcription from an extended podcast interview Dutcher gave in 2010 for a couple of reasons. First of all, I feel Dutcher's membership and status as a cultural insider is key to his ability to produce an authentic Mormon spiritual film style, and, therefore, a change in that status is significant in how it affects his creative work and the style with which it is created. Of course, it could be argued that one doesn't need to be a Mormon to create a Mormon film any more than Steven Spielberg had to be African American to direct *The Color Purple*, a film about the African American experience. But as I am arguing that one's concept of God, divine communication, the purpose of life, the possibilities of the afterlife, modes of worship and all other religiously specific things affect the style of a "spiritual" film, then a shift in that concept necessitates a shift in the style. So, a director doesn't need to rob a bank to create a great heist film, but I argue that a director's spiritual beliefs affect the style of films he or she makes that deal with the Transcendent. More specifically, if one is attempting to make a film that

evokes a Mormon experience with an LDS specific Transcendent, one has to be a believing Latter-Day Saint of one kind or another.

The other reason I include that quote is to point out its similarities to both his own previous experiences with personal revelation and with the origin story of Joseph Smith as prophet. Like his epiphany at that backyard cookout that eventually led to the production of *God's Army*, this was another moment in which the veil was thin for Dutcher. But, instead of leading him into further spiritual, creative, and financial involvement with the LDS church and its doctrine, this personal revelation led him away from the church. Dutcher himself points the similarities between his epiphany and the experiences of young Joseph Smith toward the end of the quote. As a fourteen year old boy in rural New York state, Smith was troubled by all the contradictions being presented by the religious revival culture that was in full-swing in his area. Smith himself describes it as "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. . . the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying 'Lo, here!' and others, 'Lo, there!" (*Joseph Smith History* 1.5). He couldn't reconcile the differences between Presbyterianism, Methodism, and the variety of other sects vying for converts at the time.

So, as the story goes, Joseph came across a scripture in the New Testament, James 1:5, which reads, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and ubraideth not; and it shall be given him." Smith took this as literal instruction and so went to a patch of woods near his house one morning in the spring of 1820 in order to pray privately and ask God which religion he should join. In his official, canonized history, Smith writes about attempting to pray but being restrained by some kind of dark force, the Devil trying to stop what

was about to happen. He describes "Thick darkness [gathering] around him" and how he felt as though he was "doomed to sudden destruction" until he "[exerted] all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy" (JSH 1.15,16). In the next moment, "just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me, I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other – This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (JSH 116,17). It was this experience that eventually led to Joseph founding the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

This story is foundational for Mormonism and for Mormons. Not only is it the story that begins the mythology upon which the entire institution is set, but it is the pattern which all Latter-Day Saints are encouraged to follow for themselves. If you have a question, seek God and He will provide an answer. (It is not taught, however, that average members should expect a dramatic vision or divine visitation. Rather, most people expect to hear the "still small voice" referred to earlier or experience a "burning in their bosom" when they have the right answer or a "stupor of thought" when they have the wrong one.) So the irony is that Dutcher followed Smith's pattern of personal revelation right out of the church. In seeking to reconcile inconsistencies in church history, practice, doctrine, and culture, he sought divine help that, for him, instructed him out of the entire thing.

Dutcher's loss of belief left him reeling, and he was grateful that he had just received funding to complete *States of Grace* because "it gave me something to do" (Dehlin). After completing, marketing, and releasing the film, Dutcher worked on smaller side projects while

trying to navigate his new, suddenly unmoored way of looking at the world. In 2007, he wrote an op-ed piece for the *Daily Herald* in Provo, Utah in which he offered some "parting words" to LDS filmmakers. In the largely positive letter, Dutcher encourages still-faithful filmmakers to reject the low-quality farce that marked many LDS films to that point and to "Reach higher. Don't just 'make a movie.' Make the movie. If you knew you only had two years to live, and that you could only make one more movie, what movie would it be? What do you want your children to understand? What do you want to understand before you die? . . . Grasp your potential. Begin the exploratory marriage of Mormonism and film. Combine the unknown depths of Mormonism with the untapped potential of film. The result will be the films the world needs" ("Parting Words"). In the letter, he also made public that he was no longer a practicing member of the church. Again, for a culture so preoccupied with who is within the ranks and who is not, someone of Dutcher's prominence leaving is significant. Interestingly, Dutcher doesn't resist the opportunity for a little self-promotion at the end of the piece where he writes, "My brothers and sisters, I respectfully leave Mormon cinema in your capable -- and now seasoned -- hands. I hope that someday I will hear a few of your names mentioned in the company of the handful of filmmakers who have dared to explore human spirituality in film: Bergman, Bresson, Tarkovsky, Dreyer, Ozu, etc. One of my greatest hopes, of course (in true competitive spirit), is that one day my name will be at the very top of that list" ("Parting Words"). At the time, Dutcher's goal was still to be a spiritual filmmaker, just not a Mormon one.

It is this negation of belief, this canceling out of Mormonism that informs Dutcher's final film in the Mormon quartet, *Falling*. The film centers on an inactive Latter-Day Saint named Eric Boyle who lives in Los Angeles and works as a videographer stringer for local news agencies. He films car accidents and house fires by day while writing screenplays and trying to

get a production deal in his off time. Meanwhile, his wife tries to make it as an actress in the film industry. Boyle happens across a gangland killing, films it, sells the recording to the news, and is then tracked down by the brutally violent gang members who are angry at their newfound notoriety. Harsh, bloody, and profane, the film is an excruciating experience. However, Dutcher is fond of pointing out that he wrote the screenplay for *Falling* long before he wrote his gentler, more faith-affirming *God's Army*. So he rejects the idea that he would create a film like *Falling* in direct response to the loss of his belief, but while the script had been around for the better part of a decade, it was only after Dutcher left the church that he was galvanized into actually producing the film. The content may have already existed in its nascent form, but the tone, style, and final filmed version of that content would not have come to be if not for his loss of belief. In other words, *Falling* is the exception that proves the rule of an LDS spiritual film style. Once he was no longer Mormon, per se, the look, feel, and content of his work changed dramatically. We can see more clearly what is in the first three films by seeing what is utterly absent in the fourth, post-belief film.

Chapter Four

***God's Army:* The Work Begins**

     God's Army, Dutcher's first theatrically released film, centered around two Mormon missionaries serving in Los Angeles and grossed approximately 2.5 million dollars. It was unabashedly Mormon in its content and characters and was an example of a philosophy articulated by Dutcher following the film's release: "I don't feel at all shy about confessing an artistic agenda. I'm not out to convert the world, but it is my intention to open myself up through my work and let the rest of humanity see the world through my Mormon eyes. If they liked the way the world looks through those eyes, great. Welcome aboard. If they don't, that's fine too. At least we've communicated. They know me better and understand me better, and hopefully they know and understand Mormonism better as well" (Bigelow 11). A large part of the appeal of *God's Army* was watching the fish-out-of-water missionaries trying to do their work in Hollywood of all places.

     Dutcher's 2000 film *God's Army* tells the story of Elder Jared Allen, a Mormon missionary from Kansas just starting his two year proselyting service in southern California. Allen is hesitant and more bewildered than thrilled by his assignment. His first companion, Elder Dalton (played by Dutcher), is older and, for reasons that become apparent later in the film, not very tolerant of Allen's lack of enthusiasm and urgency. The film follows the two through the various activities of contemporary LDS missionaries – tracting (going door-to-door), teaching lessons about the church, sharing meals with local members, and goofing around with other missionaries. The pair shares a house with two other sets of missionaries: Sandoval (the charming flirt), Banks (Dalton's co-leader in the house), Mangum (the laugh-a-minute jokester), and Kinegar (the too-tense square peg).

At times the film is light-hearted and funny but, ultimately, it is the spiritual coming-of-age journey of Elder Allen and takes itself quite seriously. Content-wise, the film is significant because it is one of the first times an inherently Mormon experience was realistically depicted in a widely released commercial film. The dramatic narrative is built entirely around Mormon concerns -- will this "investigator" (Mormon terminology for someone taking formal lessons from the missionaries and considering joining the church) believe and get baptized? Will this missionary be obedient to the strict rules of conduct he is supposed to observe? Will the protagonist overcome his doubts and "gain a testimony" of the truthfulness of the Latter-Day Saint church? Dutcher's characters were neither the winking parodies nor the lecherous, mustache-twirling villains films had portrayed in the past. The film was clearly an effort to tell a good story that happened to be Mormon.

Hollywood/Holywood Style

God's Army, while the least stylistically and technically developed of the quartet, is important for the ways in which it sets the stage for both Dutcher's thematic and aesthetic concerns. Of course, the overt Mormon content is present – the titular army refers to the white-shirt-black-nametag LDS missionaries seen bicycling all over the world, knocking on people's doors in hopes of sharing the message of Mormonism with the uninitiated.

Dogmatic content aside, there are inklings and more than inklings of Dutcher's Mormon spiritual film style in *God's Army*. There are two pairs of sequences that reflect first, the LDS belief in the spiritual coexisting within the immanent, and second, light as a metaphor for the preoccupation with maintaining the companionship of the Holy Ghost. The first pair of sequences involve Elder Allen, the protagonist, and his experiences as a novice missionary as he encounters the physical and spiritual geography of southern California.

The initial montage featured in the film is significant because of the way that it heralds the movie's intention: this isn't your mother's Mormon movie. It takes place after a pair of older, more experienced Elders picks up Elder Allen at LAX. Allen informs the other two that he's from Kansas and one of the other missionaries jokingly says, "You're not in Kansas anymore, Elder." This might as well be a warning to Latter-Day saint viewers expecting the usual sanitized version of reality usually presented in institutional Mormon films. Always careful to "avoid the very appearance of evil," institutional films would never feature documentary-style footage of downtown Hollywood. *God's Army*, on the other hand, begins with exactly that. The van carrying the three missionaries cruises down Hollywood Boulevard on its way to the mission headquarts. Set to an upbeat rock song by the gravel-voiced Greg Simpson, the montage is rapid-fire, cutting back and forth between expected area icons such as Grauman's Chinese Theater, the Angelina billboard, and Ripley's Odditorium as well as the storefronts of adult bookstores and strip clubs. A homeless man in a wheelchair flips off the camera as it pans past. Cops wrestle a man, trying to handcuff him. There are twenty five individual shots in a minute and two seconds. The sequence is not just a kind of visual catalogue of the various forms of sensuality (sexual and otherwise) available in 21st century Los Angeles, but the form itself is sensual and physical. It is intended to engage the viewer's body through the slightly vertiginous viscerality of handheld camera work, the toe-tapping rhythm of the music, and the brief pulchritudinous leers produced by glimpses of strip clubs and sex shops. This section of the film acknowledges and excites the senses in a way that is meant to serve as a counterpoint to what comes later. Raucous, funny, and provocative, the montage is as pop and traditional Hollywood as it gets. Quick cuts, pans, documentary-style filming, and a rock soundtrack all mark it as such.

It is by no means unusual or remarkable if only compared to other mainstream Hollywood movies or if not examined in relationship to other important sequences within the film itself.

However, the way in which the film twines its Hollywood style with a slower, more serious approach shows that Dutcher's films have more on their mind than just a serviceable, slice-of-life depiction of Mormon missionary life. *God's Army* does employ traditional Hollywood style obviously, but it also features moments and sequences that are almost Schraderian in their stillness and slowness. In most Hollywood films, the first minutes usually signal the tone of the entire film. A Michael Bay film usually begins with a frenetic, quick-cut edited action sequence of singular bombast. Rarely (if ever), do they shift gears later in the film and feature long, slow takes with only diegetic sound in the background and subtle, almost inexpressive performances from the actors. It is this combination and counterpoint that makes *God's Army* (and two of the other three films in Dutcher's quartet) interesting but also what makes the style of the film inherently Mormon.

I want to compare the arrival-in-Hollywood sequence to one later in the film when Elder Allen confronts his own lack of faith. Long takes, very purposeful mise en scène, and the absence of non-diegetic sound are in direct counterpoint to the earlier montage. The two of them paired together comprise an important component in an LDS film style.

The sequence I'm describing takes place just after Kinegar has decided to go AWOL from his missionary work because he has lost his faith. When young men serve as LDS missionaries, they are assigned by church leadership to some distant place and are expected to stay there for two years and not leave. They are allowed to communicate with friends and family through letters and occasional phone calls, but otherwise, they are expected to do missionary work full-time and, importantly, are expected to stay with their companion at all times. Leaving

your companion and leaving the mission boundaries are both major taboos. Dalton and Allen track Kinegar down to a bus station and unsuccessfully attempt to bring him back to the apartment. Kinegar, in fact, sensing Allen's own uncertainty about the church and about his place in the mission field, tried to tempt him to come along with him. Allen refuses but the scene erupts into a physical confrontation that I cover later in this chapter.

Following the confrontation, Allen and Dalton stop at a dimly lit all-night diner. Slumped in a booth, Allen asks Dalton, "He's wrong, isn't he?" (Meaning Kinegar is wrong about the church being a lie, about missionary work being a waste of time, etc.) Annoyed and a little despondent, Dalton snaps at Allen. He asks, "Why are you still here?" and says, "I can't convert you."

Allen's narrative is brought to the moment of crisis in which something must change. Confronted with his own lack of belief, it's apparent he must either get the faith he needs or, like Kinegar, move on. This context sets up the sequence in question.

The entire sequence lasts three minutes and thirty seven seconds. In that time, there are only seventeen individual shots. Comparing that with the initial montage that featured twenty five shots in barely over a minute, it's clear this portion of the film is designed to do something else entirely. Yes, the sequences are radically different in tone, pace, content, movement, and sound. One celebrates the sensuality of the setting as well as of contemporary filmmaking itself. The other emphasizes a calmer spiritual component of film's content and its style. Nearly wordless and devoid of any non-diegetic music, Elder Allen's prayer sequence comes as close as anything in the film to a Schraderian ideal of silence and stillness. Allen is shown sitting on his bed in the apartment he shares with the other missionaries. It's apparent it is still the night of Kinegar's departure. Clearly unsettled by the rebuke he received from Dalton, he resolves to do

something about it. He gets up and moves to the dimly lit kitchen. He scoops the anti-Mormon books and pamphlets Kinegar left for him into the garbage and gets out his own copy of the scriptures. The entire scene is illuminated only by one dim light over the table. (Interestingly, the shot of Allen as played by Jared Brown looking frustrated under the harsh, over-the-table light is very visually similar to one on *Brigham City*, which also features Brown. That scene centers on a whole other kind of revelation. But that's a story for another chapter.) The rest of the sequence is comprised of various longish shots of Allen either kneeling, pacing, or reading. The repetition of the action connotes the frustration of the situation – wanting revelation, needing some kind of spiritual relief but only feeling the mundane repetition of one's own paltry efforts at getting it.

There are two shots within the sequence that best represent the contrast between this and the arrival montage. The first takes places after Allen shoves his scriptures aside and is ready to pray, Joseph Smith (and Richard Dutcher) style, for answers. The shot is taken through a doorway of the cramped apartment, and Allen is framed by it. Within the frame of the doorway, behind Allen is an open shelf with boxes of cereal, Tupperware containers, and food storage canisters on it. The door and the shelf both frame Allen as he gingerly repositions a kitchen chair so he can rest his arms on it as he kneels. It is one of what I call Dutcher's icon-shots. While not quite as sculptural as something Tarkovsky produced in any of his films, it has the same sense of careful composition and an echo of traditional religious imagery. This shot lasts for twenty seconds and in its stillest moments, it evokes an icon of Christ praying in Gethsemane, Joseph kneeling in the woods, or Saint Seraphim supplicated before the Virgin Mary.

The second shot with this same quality follows almost immediately. Once Allen kneels down at his chair, he's silent, self-conscious, and unable to speak. Frustrated, he sits up in the chair and stares away from the kitchen light into the darkness. He sits in perfect profile to the

camera. The shot isn't terribly long – eleven seconds – but the stillness of it and the perfect framing, Allen dead-center of the screen, set in exact perpendicularity to the camera, both evoke the feel of religious iconography.

It is here in this first film that Dutcher contrasts a reverential stillness that is silent to the point of emptiness with the luxurious slickness of traditional Hollywood methods. His Mormon upbringing and belief taught him that in our mortal life "there is an opposition in all things. If not so. . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, *all things must needs be a compound in one*" (2 Nephi 2.11, emphasis added). In other words, everything must have its opposite number in life – sickness and health, spiritual desires and physical desires, but importantly, these opposing forces act in concert. They are all part of the plan and ultimately add up to assisting us in becoming more like God. A Mormon's ultimate goal is the unity of both body and spirit, not the glorification of one over the other. Therefore, a Mormon film style that reflects this belief is both sexy and sacred, frenetic and still. Obviously, as in a Latter-Day Saint's spiritual life, the ultimate goal is fusion but the day-to-day reality is that sometimes experiences are primarily physical or primarily spiritual and the two don't necessarily gel so much as they serve as a contrast to highlights the attributes of each. It is in *God's Army* that Hollywood acts as a counterpoint to Holywood rather than as an ingredient in stylistic fusion. In some cases, especially in this case of Dutcher's first film and first stab at an LDS spiritual style, it is enough that both components co-exist within a film and point out to viewers that the physical and the spiritual both have a rightful place within the Mormon worldview. They may not achieve fusion or even necessarily make a formal attempt at it, but coexistence and counterpoint here are a good beginning.

Go Toward the Light: Light Metaphors as Spiritual Indicators

The Mormon preoccupation with light as a metaphor for spiritual connectedness is one of the most prominent stylistic attributes of *God's Army*. While the spirit/body connection may seem tenuous to some viewers, the use of light as a barometer for the spiritual state of characters on screen ought to be apparent to any viewer. The Latter-Day Saint book of scripture, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, a collection of revelations given primarily to Joseph Smith during the founding years of the church, contains a key verse that summarizes the significance of light imagery to Mormons: "And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things" (DC 88:67). Having one's eye be single to the glory of God or, in other words, being spiritually connected to the Devine though obedience, faith, and humility, gives one access to God, or at least his inspiration, intelligence, guidance, etc. If you are connected to God, you are filled with light. Conversely, if you are disconnected, you are essentially spiritually benighted.

So, with this understanding in mind, it is useful to look at how the symbolic use of light plays into the two characters in *God's Army* who are meant to serve as polarities between which the uncertain Elder Allen is caught: Dalton and Kinegar. Dalton is the rule keeper, the moral compass, and the sacrificial lamb of the film. At 29 years old, he is dramatically older than your average missionary, most of whom are between 19 and 21. Viewers later learn that Dalton wasn't born into the church, but rather he converted after a four year process of study and prayer. He abandoned medical school, left his non-member father behind, and took on a two-year term

of missionary service in southern California. His enthusiasm, work ethic, and even his rigidity in keeping the rules and not suffering fools mark him as sort of the uber-missionary.

On the other hand, there is Elder Kinegar who, from the beginning, is marked as Dalton's opposite number. Viewers don't learn much at all about Kinegar's background, and instead he is something of a straw man set up to represent doubt, disobedience, and a lack of genuine spiritual connection. He enters the film when Dalton pranks Allen by having him knock on his own new apartment door and having another missionary pose as an angry, aggressive civilian who picks a fight with the new kid. A group of other missionaries inside the house erupt into laughter when Allen realizes he's been played, but Elder Kinegar is the lone stick in the mud who shakes his finger at the others, calling their behavior "immature." Immediately, Kinegar is different and separate from the other missionaries. Initially, it seems he's just a stiff, but soon the film shows him to be something much more sinister from an LDS point of view. At breakfast the next day, Kinegar is seen reading a book of anti-Mormon literature and asking questions like, "Hey, did you know…." His companion, Elder Banks, is irritated and asks him why he keeps reading stuff that is "as bad as pornography." Kinegar replies that investigators might ask questions raised in the book and points out that it's good to "know your enemy." Buying into the doubts raised by anti-Mormon literature (of which there is actually quite a lot in the world), identifying the people he is supposed to love and teach as the "enemy," disobeying the strict mission rules (he is seen at one point listening to obviously secular music on a headset while supposedly out working), and just generally being joyless in his missionary service all mark Kinegar as Dalton's opposite. Both characters depart the narrative of the film before its end, and the lighting Dutcher employs as each one leaves demonstrates both the spiritual state of each character as well as the beginnings of this important stylistic element that Dutcher employs.

The pair of sequences in which light-as-spirit symbolism is featured involve Dalton and Kinegar's departures from the film. The first happens just prior to Allen's dark night of the soul when he and Dalton are at the bus station trying to convince Kinegar to not abandon his mission. The bus station lighting is high key with few shadows. As Kinegar sits, bus ticket in hand, and Dalton walks in to persuade him to return , the two are on somewhat equal footing. The station appears to be a neutral place, a location of stasis, spiritually speaking. Everyone and everything is equally lit. The conflict between Kinegar and Dalton becomes physical quickly (again, an interaction I will cover in the section on violence) and it becomes clear that Kinegar is definitely leaving. He moves to the door of the station and, framed there between the sliding glass doors, he appears to be just on the edge between two worlds – the evenly lit neutrality of the station and the infernal-looking orange and black darkness just beyond. He asks Allen to come with him and the younger missionary declines. "Suit yourself," Kinegar says and he walks out the door into the darkness. Instead of walking straight out, he cuts right, moving behind one of the tinted glass doors. This way, rather than staying in view and his white shirt still reflecting the ambient light of the parking lot, Kinegar literally seems swallowed up by the darkness of his own decision.

The imagery echoes a significant image from the *Book of Mormon* in which a prophet named Lehi has an allegorical dream. In the dream, Lehi sees all of humanity traveling across a vast field trying to get to a tree loaded with beautiful white fruit. Various obstacles arise, making it challenging for people to get to the tree (which represents God's love.) One of the obstacles is "a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost" (1 Nephi 8.23). It is explained later that the mists of darkness specifically represent the effects of sin, as in the loss of the presence of the spirit. Because Kinegar is disobedient, because he is rebellious,

because he is proud, he lacks the spirit. Because he lacks the spirit, he loses his light. As Kinegar disappears behind that glass door into the Los Angeles night, it is as though he is wandering off and is lost.

As I wrote earlier, Dalton is Kinegar's opposite number. Therefore, it is fitting that his departure from the film's narrative serve as a counterpoint to Kinegar's. We learn about midway through the film that Dalton has cancer (a revelation I will discuss in the section on ordinances), and it is apparent his life is in danger. However, noble sacrifice that he is, he refuses to go home or lose precious time to treatment. So, near the end of the film, Allen wakes up at 6:30 a.m., the regular time for LDS missionaries to rise, and when he tries to wake Dalton up too, he finds that he died in the night.

Because his body has to be shipped home, Dalton's impromptu funeral attended by his missionary colleagues and a few converts takes place in an airplane hangar. Lit from the side using seemingly only ambient light, the scene is mostly Dalton's mission president offering a brief eulogy. In his speech, not coincidentally, the president speaks of how he runs into someone every day who has been touched by the deceased missionary's service: "Somebody that he taught, somebody that he trained, or reached in and pulled out of the world and *into the light of the gospel*" (emphasis added). This verbal hint is obviously meant to echo what happens next.

Once the president finishes his remarks, Elder Allen and the other missionaries approach the coffin, lift it off its stand and approach the door to the hangar. There's a small amount of filmmaking trickery here. Though the scene has been lit from the side for the entire sequence, as the missionaries take up the casket and move to the door, they are suddenly shown in darkness and approaching a sliding hangar door that is only just now being opened. Almost opaque white light breaks into the black hangar. The contrast between the interior and exterior of the hangar is

so extreme, details on each side are blurred and faded so the picture almost becomes an abstraction. The camera cuts to the faces of some of the mourners – the mission president, his wife, a couple of people Dalton taught – and in each of these shots of their individual faces, a sheet of light slides over their faces as the hangar doors open. As Dalton departs mortality, his mission, and the film itself, it is as though he is being welcomed into a cloud of light. The light here is meant to symbolize Dalton's spiritual success and spiritual connection to the Divine. Rather than disappearing into the darkness, he is literally being lifted up into the light. In the closing portion of his eulogy, the president paraphrases from the gospel of John in the New Testament when he says, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it. And whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. Elder Dalton has lost his mortal life but we know that he has found his eternal life." Once the coffin clears the doors of the hangar, the Elders carrying it are immediately lit with high, bright natural sunlight. As they continue to walk in the light, so to speak, the hangar worker closes the door behind them. The individual mourners' faces are shown again, only this time the shadow of the door slides back across them, and the door closes. Dutcher's use of light in this sequence is obviously meant to symbolize the spiritual success and connectedness of his character. Dalton's spirit seems to flare just for a moment, illuminating everyone around him, before they are left again in the relative darkness of regular mortal life. This sequence, more than any other in the quartet, literally invokes the parting of Astle's veil. While the symbolism may be a little on-the-nose, it is certainly a moment in which viewers are meant to experience a moment of Mormon Transcendence. Hope in death, the reality of more beyond this mortal life. It is in this sequence in *God's Army* that a viewer is most likely to feel that the veil might be slightly parted. Dutcher continues to use light (or its absence) as code for the presence of the Holy Ghost through his entire quartet of Mormon films.

Showing the Sacred: Priesthood Ordinances in *God's Army*

One central component of the LDS faith and worldview is ordinance work. As Mormons see it, ordinances are sacred acts performed by the authority of God's priesthood. Certain ordinances are considered essential to returning to God's presence and are often referred to as "saving ordinances." Some saving ordinances are baptism, confirmation, and marriage performed in an LDS temple. Other ordinances are not essential but offer comfort or blessings for people while they are in mortality. Non-essential ordinances include the blessing of the sick, taking the sacrament, father's blessings, and the dedication of graves. Like most religious rituals, ordinance work is a symbolic way for Mormons to turn their thoughts and actions toward God. They are a form of service and humility for Latter-Day Saints. However, they are also meant to be efficacious, concrete actions that have a binding effect both here on earth and in heaven. In other words, being baptized into the Mormon church isn't just a symbolic acceptance of God or of LDS beliefs – it is an actual, physical cleansing of one's sins. Being married in the temple isn't just a symbolic commitment to spend one's life with his or her spouse – the ordinance actually seals a couple together so they are married and connected to one another for the rest of eternity. Participation in ordinances is central to the LDS way of thinking, and it affects how Mormons view the world around them. The world is essentially broken into two groups: those who have participated in saving ordinances and those who haven't yet. Because of the powerful, definitional place ordinance work holds in the LDS worldview, the content of any depiction of Mormonism on film should include it and any cinematic style should somehow incorporate it.

God's Army features the ordinances of baptism as well as priesthood blessings for the sick. The two baptisms performed in the film each serve a different narrative function. When Elder Dalton is seen immersing Benny, the physically disabled investigator, in the Pacific Ocean,

it is directly after the missionary has essentially risen from his sick bed in the hospital. Having suffered a devastating seizure related to in inoperable brain tumor, Dalton should be flat on his back receiving treatment of some kind. Instead, fed up with inactivity, he escapes the hospital on his own and finds his way to the seaside site for the baptism. While technically Benny is the one being "born again of water and the spirit" by being immersed, it is Dalton who is seemingly raised from the dead. The opportunity to participate in someone else's saving ordinance saves Dalton himself.

The second baptism takes place when Elder Dalton immerses several investigators following Elder Dalton's death. Though Allen's spiritual galvanization is seen earlier in the film, performing baptisms makes him a "real" missionary and answers the movie's central question of how Elder Allen's trial of faith will turn out. So this baptism also becomes a rebirth: Allen transforms from uncertain greenhorn to seasoned pillar of faith.

Baptism is significant because, as in all LDS ordinance work, they are not just symbolic. Baptism is not simply an outward sign of spiritual commitment or membership in a group. Latter Day Saints believe that the act has actual, concrete effects on an individual's daily life and, therefore, on the outcome of that person's eternal salvation. Ordinances, to Mormons, are not for this world alone, but rather are the connecting link between this world and Heaven.

The film also features two Priesthood blessings of healing. Including these as content in a theatrically-released film intended for mass consumption was problematic for many LDS filmgoers. The ordinance of baptism, while sacred and efficacious, is usually a public event. Members of the church are encouraged to invite non-member friends and family to any baptism that takes place. The idea is that the spirit present at a baptism will touch the hearts of the uninitiated and spark a curiosity or a spiritual hunger in them that could possibly lead to their

own conversion. Blessings, on the other hand, are quite different. Because they are given for very personal, individualized concerns, they are usually quite private. A person who is ill or in some kind of spiritual, emotional, or mental distress may ask a Priesthood holder (usually two as there are two different components to blessings for the ill) to come to their house and bless them in the privacy of their own living room or sick bed. It's hardly the sort of thing you invite the neighbors over for.

So, when Dutcher included two Priesthood blessings (one partial, one complete) in a commercial film, many members of the church felt he was doing something sacrilegious and trying to profit from something that was too sacred for mass consumption. However, Dutcher's stated reasons for including them are more in keeping with his goals to be a spiritual filmmaker. (Naturally. It's unlikely that any director, especially a Mormon one, would openly say, "Yeah, I just did it for the money.") In the director's commentary for the film, Dutcher says, "We see a Priesthood ordinance performed which is a very sacred thing to us and something we hold in reverence. It's tricky to portray in a film. Again, there was no precedent. So I had to approach it very reverently and prayerfully to decide how to do that because it was important to the story, and I thought it was an important thing to do. Doing the same kind of scene in a different kind of film would have been totally inappropriate but in context here, I think it's not only appropriate but a good and necessary thing to do." Dutcher felt, at the time anyway, that rather than being heretical, including explicit Priesthood ordinances in his film was "good and necessary," an act of worship rather than one of blasphemy. This coincides with the Mormon belief that God and His influence can exist or come from almost any source. Dutcher embraced the idea that films can be a place where the Divine can be encountered rather than as some simple diversion from the "real' world. So in viewing the blessing scenes in *God's Army*, audience members can think

of them as moments when Dutcher intended there to be that earth/heaven link for the characters but also, potentially, for audience members themselves. In many ways, that idea is the essence of a Mormon spiritual film style.

The first is administered to Dalton when he begins convulsing due to complications with his cancer. Allen, who sleeps in the top bunk bed above Dalton, feels the bed shaking and leaps down, assuming it's an earthquake. When he sees that nothing else in the room is moving, he turns to see Dalton convulsing and gurgling, in the throes of a seizure. Ironically, he yells for Elder Kinegar who comes in and is quickly followed by Sandoval and Banks. Mangum calls 911 while the others prepare to administer a blessing. Sandoval and Banks attempt to restrain Dalton and keep him from hurting himself while Kinegar begins to anoint the afflicted missionary's head.

As I mentioned above, there are two components to a Priesthood blessing for someone who is sick or otherwise physically afflicted. According to an LDS publication entitled *A Family Guidebook*, "Administering to the sick has two parts: (1) anointing with oil and (2) sealing the anointing. Anointing with Oil: One man who holds the Melchizedek Priesthood anoints the person who is sick. To do so, he 1. puts a drop of consecrated oil on the person's head, 2. places his hands lightly on the person's head and calls the person by his or her full name, 3. states that he is anointing the person by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, 4. states that he is anointing with oil that has been consecrated for anointing and blessing the sick and afflicted, 5. closes in the name of Jesus Christ.

"Sealing the Anointing: Normally, two or more men who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood place their hands lightly on the head of the person who is sick. One of the men seals the anointing. To do so, he: 1.Calls the person by his or her full name, 2. states that he is sealing

the anointing by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, 3. gives a blessing as the Spirit directs, 4. closes in the name of Jesus Christ" ("Priesthood Ordinances and Blessings").

It is a formal process that both requires following set expectations of order and certain kinds of language but also requires the spontaneity of inspiration. Again the idea of duality and fusion are present.

The significance of the use of olive oil also probably needs a little context. According to D. Kelly Ogden, a professor of ancient scripture, Mormons use olive oil in their some of their ordinances for a variety reasons: "First and foremost, of course, we use olive oil because the Lord has commanded us to do so.

On one occasion, Jesus encountered a man who had been blind from birth. The Savior anointed the man's eyes with clay and then instructed him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Perhaps the Lord wanted the blind man to be anointed and washed in order for him to be physically involved in the healing process. Likewise, baptism by immersion, the sacramental bread and water, and the laying on of hands and anointing with oil all personally involve the faithful participant in the holy ordinance.

This kind of involvement seems to be aided by the use of symbols. Throughout the ages, symbols—physical objects, substances, and actions—have been used to represent sacred powers and practices. When we are baptized, water is the physical property, or symbol, involved in the ordinance. The water does not cleanse us from sin; it is the faith and repentance that precede our baptism that allow God to grant a remission of our sins. . . So it is with administration to the sick. We apply hands and oil, the physical touch and the tangible substance, but the hands and the oil do not heal. It is faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the priesthood that heals ("I Have a

Question"). So anointing an afflicted person's head with oil is symbolic, of course, but it is also

an act of obedience on the Priesthood holder's part as well as the oil serving as a kind of physical

medium, another kind of link between the temporal and the eternal.

So it is significant that when Kinegar has dabbed a drop of oil on Dalton's head and is

about to pronounce that part of the blessing, he balks and won't say anything. Sandoval and

Banks both urge him to start speaking, "Say it! Say the blessing, man!" as Dalton continues to

twitch and gurgle in the bed. Kinegar's inability or unwillingness foreshadow his departure later

in the film but also set up another opposition between him and the blessing that Dalton

administers later in the film.

Sandoval pushes Kinegar aside and performs the anointing himself. He then switches

places with Banks who seals the anointing. The scene cuts away from the blessing before it is

complete, but the mere fact that it was included at all signals that Dutcher was very serious about

making a film that was utterly and unapologetically Mormon in its style and, therefore, its

content. One cannot make a film with the intention of having viewers come in contact with the

LDS conception of the Transcendent without including the Mormon-themed content that

Mormons hold sacred. Much the same as how the spirit and body are intertwined and meant to be

together, film style and content are inseparable when it comes to an LDS concept of the Divine.

The second Priesthood blessing of *God's Army* takes place very near the end of the film.

An investigator, Benny, has gone missing. He missed his baptismal date and hasn't been in touch

with anyone. Elders Dalton and Allen stop by his house repeatedly with no luck in finding him.

During their nightly companionship prayer, Dalton, inspired, suddenly gets up mid-prayer, grabs

a phone book and starts calling around looking for Benny. After a time, he finds the hospital

where Benny had been only to discover he was just released an hour before. They head to

Benny's house and find that he has been a victim of an attack. It's implied that it is gang related, and this appears to be a recurring theme of Dutcher's. (While it's not inherently Mormon in any way, the theme of gang-related violence is clearly a hallmark of Dutcher's work as an auteur. It figures into every one of his Mormon quartet films in one way or another. In this case, the violence itself is elided, but we see its aftermath: Benny, bruised and broken, unable to walk even with the arm braces he has used throughout the film.)

It's important to note here that the character of Benny has been unable to walk unassisted throughout the film and that now, after the attack, he is unable to even sit up on his own. For all intents and purposes in the film, he is utterly disabled at this point and all signs suggest that there isn't any meaningful recovery for him on the horizon. It is a hopeless situation. Knowing this, Dalton asks Benny about his own faith. "Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you believe that he died for your sins and that he has all power, even to raise you from the dead if it is his will?" When Benny answers in the affirmative, Allen anoints him and then Dalton seals the anointing. The ordinance is very explicit within the film. The camera even catches the tiny drop of olive oil falling from a small cruse onto the crown of Benny's head. The language of both the anointing and sealing is included in its entirety which is unusual. Even in the rare cases in which ordinances are depicted in other LDS made films (most of them institutional proselyting or training films), they are usually featured as part of a musical montage and Priesthood holders are seen mouthing the words but nothing can be heard. One notable exception is To see and hear an entire Priesthood ordinance, specifically something as private and sacred as a blessing of healing, is unusual in any film either by or about Mormons, and yet, given the centrality of those acts to Latter-Day Saint belief and daily life, it's hard to see how any film depicting Mormonism or professing to portray a Mormon point of view could be complete without them.

The sequence featuring Benny's blessing is almost entirely silent. Dalton's flat, somewhat inexpressive voice intoning the blessing, Allen silent with his head bowed. While there are shot/reverse shots, the camera is generally still and close on the three men's faces. It is a very simple sequence in terms of style. This is intended to offset and highlight what is about to happen next. Within Benny's blessing, Dalton declares, "Your Father in Heaven has heard your many prayers these many nights as you have asked for the ability to walk. This day, Benny, you will receive this great blessing. . . From this day forward you will walk and not be weary and you will run and not be faint. This is the blessing you desire and this is the blessing your Father in Heaven desires for you." Benny then gingerly sits up on his own power and slides his legs off the side of the bed.

The camera cuts to the dining room of the house where Benny's sister is tearfully talking to other members. In mid-sentence, she looks up and sees her brother standing in the door. The two embrace while the other people in the room stare at them and then at Dalton and Allen as they enter the room also. High, rising violin strains play in the background while tear struck women gaze slightly upward. It's apparent that the audience is to feel that a literal miracle has occurred. While this part of the sequence definitely plays into the "sniffles, sobs, and goosebumps" of religious films that Paul Schrader criticizes, it still fits just fine within a Mormon spiritual film style. Not only does the combination of borderline melodrama and asceticism fit into the LDS idea of spirit/body fusion, but the emotion is not as much the point of this sequence as just the inclusion at all of a Priesthood ordinance from beginning to end and evidence of its efficacy. That is one element that sets this ordinance apart from the one administered to Dalton earlier in the film. Not only was the earlier blessing incomplete for the viewer, no direct effect was depicted. We never get a sense of whether or not the hurried Elders

gave the convulsing Dalton made any difference. Benny's miraculous healing as a direct result of a Priesthood blessing creates a Mormon world within the film in which such things can and do happen. Benny's blessing and healing create a filmic world where such things are possible, not fanciful or deluded.

Violence: Creating a Space for Salvation

As I mentioned earlier, violence and its after-effects are key components to a Mormon concept of the Divine and a spiritual film style that puts viewers in touch with that concept. Dutcher's use of violence both technically within the films and thematically grows and shifts over the course of the quartet, but it has its nascent beginnings in *God's Army*. The violence here is less bombastic and less visceral than in the later films, but the basic construction of violence = need for salvation therefore violence is necessary to be saved is here in abundance.

While the film doesn't have a villain per se, Elder Kinegar provides a counterpoint to Allen's spiritual development. He is part of one of the companionships that shares the apartment with Dalton and Allen and he is introduced as the lone stick-in-the-mud when the other missionaries play a joke on Allen, "the greenie," early in the film. He is shown throughout the story engaging in subtly destructive and/or disobedient behavior, listening to rock music on headphones (LDS missionaries are asked not to listen to contemporary music, read newspapers, watch films, date, etc.) and constantly reading anti-Mormon literature. As Elder Allen continues to struggle with his doubt versus his desire to believe in what he's doing, Kinegar seems more interested in looking for reasons not to embrace his chosen lifestyle. The two characters appear to be at a similar crossroads of faith but heading in opposite directions.

Two thirds of the way through the film Allen finds Kinegar's stack of anti-Mormon books (topped with *The Truth About the Mormons*) along with a note addressed to him. It's

apparent that it is a good-bye letter and that Kinegar is going "AWOL" as other missionaries put it earlier in the film. (In addition to other expectations, LDS missionaries are expected to stay in their assigned area and at their companion's side 24 hours a day. Leaving your area or abandoning your companion is considered a major violation of mission rules.) Allen and Dalton find him at the nearby bus station, ticket in hand. The antipathy between the two more experienced missionaries was made apparent earlier in the film every time Kinegar brought up an interesting "fact" from one of his books and Dalton irritably corrected him. The tension comes to a boil when, as Kinegar gets up to get on the bus, Dalton grabs him by the arm. Instantly, the two men are swinging at each other, Dalton gets his glasses slapped off, and quickly Kinegar ends up pinned to the wall of the bus station. The fight though brief, it is visceral and intense. One gets the sense that not much was faked but rather the two actors simply did what came naturally and hoped not to really hurt one another. In the DVD commentary, Dutcher mentions, "We actually dented the wall of that bus station. I threw Michael, I should say Kinegar, against the wall so hard we put a dent in the drywall." After a brief exchange, Kinegar shakes Dalton's hands from his collar, picks up his bags, moves to the door of the station. "Read those books I left you," he tells Allen. He looks at the younger missionary, who he knows is struggling, and says, "This bus goes right through Kansas City. Come on." Allen weakly demurs and Kinegar turns and disappears into the darkness waiting outside. The two remaining missionaries go to an all-night diner to nurse their literal and figurative wounds. Allen, more conflicted than ever, asks Dalton to reassure him that Kinegar was wrong. Dalton, angry and frustrated, reproves him and sharply says, "I can't convert you!"

The scene necessitates Allen to confront his own doubts. Knowing he is figuratively not far from the bus station himself, the conflict between Dalton and Kinegar galvanizes him to

action. In a long, nearly wordless montage, Allen is shown spending a sleepless night, alternately reading from the *Book of Mormon* and then kneeling to pray, asking God to confirm that his belief in the church and his missionary efforts aren't misguided. This is a pattern drawn from the *Book of Mormon* and is known as Moroni's promise. In the final section of the book, a prophet named Moroni instructs curious readers to "read these things . . . ponder it in your hearts. . . (and) ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true. . . and he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 10.3-4). This pattern of searching for spiritual affirmation is used extensively in missionary work and is often considered the backbone of one's personal testimony of the LDS faith. After repeated efforts at praying, Allen is shown in tight close-up, kneeling at a kitchen chair, his face in his hands. It's clear that it's either very late or very early and that he's been at this for hours. "Heavenly Father," he begins. A pause. He looks up. "Father?" Another longer pause, a look of weary satisfaction. An almost smile. Finally, with certainty rather than questioning in his voice, he says, "Father." The primary conflict of the film, the question of Elder Allen's spiritual commitment, is settled and, with almost zero fanfare, the climax of the film comes and goes. The next shot is of Elder Dalton waking up at 6:30 a.m. (a missionary's usual wake-up call) and finding Allen already dressed and ready for the day, telling Dalton to "Get up. Let's go do some good." The pressure of the previous night's violence turns out to be productive and leads Allen to resolution and, as we find out later, a satisfying and successful mission. Dutcher here establishes the pattern he follows for his next two films: violence creates a space for and necessitates redemption.

The other, obvious example of violence equaling salvation is Benny. Following his attack, he is lying in his bed describing what happened to the missionaries: "I thought they were going to kill me. They beat me with their guns. They beat me and kicked me. They stood on my

throat. Look, they broke my crutches. Why would they break my crutches?" Benny whimpers and sobs as he speaks, and he is as helpless as a baby. It is at this point that Dalton administers the miraculous Priesthood blessing that enables Benny to "rise, take up [his] bed, and walk" (John 5.8). While the violence itself is only described and not depicted, Benny's account makes it sound brutal, cruel, and senseless. The fact that he had no money to steal and his attackers broke his crutches add to his victimization.

The violence he suffers creates an opportunity for him to be saved. Dalton and Allen heal him through a Priesthood ordinance. Because of his miraculous healing, not only is Benny baptized, but another investigator, Brother Rose, witnesses the healing and decides to finally join the church also. Benny, who was planning on joining the church prior to his attack, would probably have been unable to serve a full-time mission for the church due to his disability, but now, we are told in the film's closing voiceover, "One year to the day after Benny's baptism, he left for his mission to Taiwan. He served a successful mission and he's now the mission leader in the Santa Monica third ward." It was being broken physically that allowed Benny the opportunity or space for his faith to be augmented to the point where he could be physically augmented as well. We can presume that had he never been attacked, he still would have joined the church but would have still been physically limited and would have had fewer spiritual opportunities because a limited ability to serve. Because he was attacked, he was enabled to be saved spiritually as well as physically.

Chapter Five

***Brigham City*: Complications and Darkness**

Dutcher's second film, *Brigham City*, represents a slight shift away from the Schraderian side of spiritual filmmaking toward a more contemporary Hollywood style. This is not to say that *God's Army* was *Mouchette* (Bresson 1967) by any means, but in comparison, the first film does seem to have more in the way of narrative and stylistic stillness and contemplation. *Brigham City*, while still having its more overtly spiritual moments, on its surface looks much more like a Hollywood thriller/crime procedural than it does a treatise on man's relationship to the divine. It is as though Dutcher wanted to try out some different narrative and formal tools in his second outing. I don't see this shift as problematic in terms of the development of an LDS spiritual film style. On the contrary, the slight pendulum swing of form and content only reinforce my idea that Dutcher's films and their style are a kind of proxy for the perpetual LDS pursuit of trying to strike a balance and fusion between the spiritual and physical sides of existence. Sometimes we end up being more carnal, sometimes we are more ascetic. That existential trial-and-error tightrope walk is reflected in Dutcher's quartet. *Brigham City* is the most mainstream and commercial of the quartet in terms of its genre, content, and style. More technically and narratively accomplished than *God's Army*, it demonstrates a step forward for Dutcher as a competent, commercial filmmaker, which, in its way is also a step forward as an LDS spiritual film stylist. The film is a treatise on the Mormon fascination with community belonging, cultural identity, and outsiderness disguised as a police procedural.

The setting this time is a fictional rural town in Utah, and the protagonist is Wes Clayton, the town sheriff who is also a Mormon bishop (a lay minister comparable to a pastor or priest).

He is an injured character both physically and emotionally. Prior to the film's narrative, his wife and young son were both killed in the car accident that left him with a leg brace and permanent limp. His main goal as both a civic and ecclesiastical leader is to keep Brigham City as innocent as possible. At one point early in the film, his deputy, Terry, tries to turn the cruiser radio from country music to news from Salt Lake (the big city). When Wes protests, Terry insists he shouldn't bury his head in the sand, that he "can't pretend it (crime, murder, rape, etc.) doesn't happen." Wes replies, "It doesn't happen. Not here. And here's all I care about."

The problem of the film's narrative is that it does begin happening in Brigham. First a young woman from out of town turns up dead on the outskirts of the city, brutally murdered in her car. Next, the local beauty queen is found raped, murdered, and hidden under the gazebo in the heart of the town park. One of Clayton's deputies (well-played by an appropriately cantankerous Wilford Brimley) is shot and killed as he tries to prevent a third young woman from being kidnapped by the same killer. It is also revealed that a runaway from the town from years before may not have actually run away and that the circumstances surrounding another young woman's accidental death may not have been so accidental.

Brigham City the town and *Brigham City* the film shift quickly from edenic paradise where nothing bad ever happens to a cauldron of death, suspicion, and guilt. As innocent people begin to turn up raped and/or murdered, it is up to the man who is both a civic and a spiritual authority to put a stop to it. The question is, of course, in a town where everyone is Mormon (and therefore presumably law-abiding, righteous, etc.), who would be responsible for such horrible acts? The film meditates on Mormon cultural assumptions about how membership in the LDS church automatically equates a degree of righteousness and how outsiders to the culture are to be distrusted. It plays with the intersection in Mormon corridor culture of political power and

religious power. It also asks, if a community is unified as one, what does it mean when a member of that community commits a horrible crime? Who bears responsibility when there is a wolf among the flock?

Stylistically, the move forward in this film is that, more so than in *God's Army*, there are individual shots that seem to evoke the sculptural stillness of directors more traditionally associated with spiritual film such as Andrei Tarkovsky or Robert Bresson. The sheriff snapping photos of the first victim amid the buzzing of flies. The gazebo in the city park illuminated by white Christmas lights in the evening after a town festival. The autumnal mountains looming above the field where the sheriff and his deputy practice target shooting. Admittedly, *Brigham City* doesn't come close to maintaining the confident, almost crazy length of Tarkovsky's meditative shots or the crystalline quality of Bresson's. These still, quiet shots are brief, but their presence in a thriller about a serial murderer add a level of visual and narrative resonance that raise the film above the average killer-of-the-week episode of *Law and Order* and show that Dutcher's style progressed and developed beyond what it was in *God's Army*. The metaphor of light, while still featured in key moments, is less prominent in this film than in its predecessor or successor.

The penultimate and final sequences in the film, the sheriff confronting and killing the culprit, and the Sunday sacrament meeting following the revelation about who the killer was, make a prime combination of Hollywood and holiness. A slow-burn face-off between a lawman and a murderer, guns on the table, constructed out of shot/reverse shots, increasing close-ups, and spooky non-diegetic music is pure classical Hollywood film style. The next sequence in a Mormon chapel on the Sunday following the death and unmasking (so to speak) of the killer is, for the most part, silent. The final moments of the scene do swell with music, but the moments

leading up to the spiritual/narrative climax of the film are as silent as, well, a church. The juxtaposition of the stillness of the final scene's almost theophanic moment with the violence and mainstream narrative satisfaction of the previous sequence epitomizes the Mormon worldview – holiness drawn out of the noise and sin of the world. Apparently striving for greater commercial success, Dutcher didn't maintain the stillness or even the average shot length in the sequence. But the germ of Mormon film style is there and continues to grow and reach something of an apex in his next film.

Body/Spirit Fusion

The sequence that most mirrors that of a traditional Hollywood thriller comes late in the film when the panic in the titular city has reached its zenith. At this point in the narrative, three people have been murdered and a fourth has been kidnapped. The entire town is searching for Jamie, the teenage girl who was taken from her job at a local gas station. Wes, in a decision that comingles his civic authority as sheriff and his ecclesiastical power as a Bishop, has his secretary contact all local men using congregational rosters from LDS wards and, at an early morning meeting, informs them that none of them are going to work that day but instead are going to pair up (like missionaries) and go from house to house and search any space large enough to hide a body. With no warrants or intentions of getting them, Clayton invokes his ecclesiastical authority by referencing the men's full-time missionary work and sends them out to perform completely unconstitutional searches. An uncomfortable sequence follows showing men searching under beds and in closets of various houses while residents look on, disturbed and frightened. Community members are shown in various shots looking through their blinds at their neighbors's houses, gathering up their children from their sunny, formerly welcoming front yards, and one man even sitting on his porch in the evening with a shotgun resting across his legs. The leafy

mountain town that was initially established as edenic descends into a kind of picturesque hell of fear, paranoia, and impending violence.

The sequence I referred to earlier takes place following a kind of undercover sting operation. One of Clayton's staff members impersonates a waitress at the only bar near Brigham City limits in order to surreptitiously gather fingerprints from local riffraff. The assumption, of course, is that one of the out-of-towner (read: non-Mormon) construction workers or beer-drinking Mormons (therefore unfaithful and disobedient) Latter-Day Saints is most likely to be the killer. (The implications of the narrow, insider viewpoint of this film would be fertile material for a whole other writing project.) So, Clayton, his undercover waitress, her boyfriend, two deputies, and a non-Mormon FBI agent dust hundreds of bottles of beer, hoping that someone capable of committing multiple murders would already have some kind of record that would provide a lead for them to follow. Nothing happens and every set of prints turns up a dead end.

Of course, all of this is very familiar territory for anyone who has ever watched an episode of *C.S.I.* or *Law and Order*. Intrepid investigators at their wits' end as a killer is on the loose, going undercover, dusting for prints – all tried and true tropes of the procedural. Because this is a Mormon film in its content and its style, the hard-boiled investigators decide to pray for instruction. The team kneels in a circle together in the back room of the sheriff's office and prays for help in finding Jamie and stopping the killer. Once the prayer is over, everyone goes home for a night of rest except for Clayton who stays to pray and think on his own.

This is where the most traditionally Hollywood style sequence commences. It borrows heavily from Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) in how it employs cinematic tricks to fake viewers out as the wounded hero finally zeroes in on the elusive killer. It begins as

Peg, Clayton's secretary and undercover waitress, gets in her car to leave the sheriff's office. The camera is propped on the hood of her car looking directly in at her. It is a standard shot for this genre, and considering the setting (late at night, a dark, windy street, autumn leaves flying past her back window) and narrative context (a killer who targets single, red-headed women), a viewer almost fully anticipates what happens next. As Peg digs for her keys in her purse, a silhouetted figures shoots up from the backseat. The soundtrack provides a discordant jangle as the head comes into view. Hollywood's much beloved (and some would say cheap) thrill of someone or something jumping out at you unexpectedly is provided here. Fortunately for Peg, the figure in the backseat is her boyfriend, Ed, who got tired while waiting for her to leave work and so took a nap in the backseat of the car. As he sits in the back explaining his reasons for being there, his face is completely in shadow, his head and shoulders obscured by darkness. Given what we already know about Dutcher's tendency to use light as a symbol for spiritual connectivity, Ed's shroud of darkness could easily be read as foreshadowing. In this moment, Dutcher plays with his audience a bit, having them guess if he is playing the role of spiritual symbolist or Hollywood thrillmaker. Is Ed a dark soul or just a red herring?

The scene then cuts back to Wes at his desk, trying to find the connection between the three young women who have been murdered. He thinks he has it (they all have red hair), but a call to the coroner's office confirms that the first girl discovered is indeed a natural blonde. Tense, pensive music plays under all the action throughout, raising the level of anticipation, signaling to the viewer that the narrative is building to something.

Back in the car, Peg has moved to the passenger seat so Ed can drive. In a series of over-the-shoulder shots, they discuss where Peg will spend the night. Ed begins driving toward his house and she starts to protest. As faithful Mormons are abstinent before marriage, he insists,

"This isn't some make-out thing. I don't want you spending the night alone or any night alone until they catch this guy." Exhausted to the point of falling asleep, Peg assents. This exchange is a series of over-the-shoulder shots from the backseat. The camera is kept at an even level whether it is pointed at either character, but the difference in the actors' heights creates an interesting effect. Because Jon Enos, the actor portraying Ed, is taller than Carrie Morgan, the actor playing Peg, she is being filmed at eye-level and he is shot at a low angle. Shots of Peg dozing in the passenger seat seem normal and standard. However, the low angle distorts Ed's face, giving him something of a menacing look. He continues to glance over (down) at Peg as she falls asleep, creating a shifty, suspicious feeling. Again, non-diegetic music gives viewers emotional cues. High, discordant whistle sounds and ticking, snake-like percussion lend the sequence a tense, haunted feel. Everything in the sequence suggests something unhappy is about to happen.

Back at the sheriff's office, Wes Clayton kneels in prayer right near where the group knelt earlier. He simply says, "Father in Heaven" but, like Elder Allen in *God's Army*, seems unable to say much more, as though the weight of the situation is too heavy for him to articulate. He looks to his right, slightly at the camera, as though something is occurring to him. The camera cuts away to him washing his face. He sits down to rest, leans over to take off his leg brace, and then looks up. In a series of five shots, the camerawork and performance all signal Wes's dawning revelation. First the camera sees the top of his head as he leans over and then his eyes as he looks up. Immediately, the camera cuts in about two feet closer to Wes's face. Same shot, same angle, just closer, as if to indicate him finally getting near the solution. Next the camera cuts to the subject of Wes's gaze: a table with his investigation crew's various cups and glasses amid the armies of dusted beer bottles. This shot is static, but then the camera quickly

cuts back to Wes where it does a relatively rapid zoom in on his face. The zoom is then mirrored as the camera returns to Peg's water glass, deputy Terry's cup, and Ed's giant red insulated soda mug. Towering over the others like a flashing red sign of guilt, Ed's mug (undoubtedly covered in fingerprints) dominates the screen. The non-diegetic whistles and knocking percussion music return to indicate that Wes's realization is both important and dangerous.

Without pausing even for a moment, the scene shifts to Ed's house where Peg walks in, barely awake. She is clearly vulnerable and trusting. As she walks out of the shot, undoubtedly headed for a soft place to sleep, the camera lingers on Ed's face. A full three seconds is spent just on his inexpressive face as he watches her. The effect is unsettling rather than comforting. Ed is clearly being set up as the killer who is waiting for another opportunity to strike.

Back at the sheriff's office, we see Wes scanning one last set of prints. Instead of the red "No Match Found" bar that had appeared after every beer bottle print, a green "Match Found" notification appears. The camera doesn't reveal the name or a photo. Instead, we again see Clayton's face with a look of surprise and realization. The shot of his open, surprised face serves as a counterpoint to the one dedicated to Ed's dark, emotionless visage. But the camera doesn't linger. As the tension in the narrative intensifies, the editing speeds up. In true Hollywood fashion, the editing and shot length near the climax of the narrative speed up,

Over the next minute and twenty seven seconds, there are twenty seven individual shots, no one lasting any longer than six seconds. Some last barely a second at most. Punctuated by spooky music and heavy, black shadows, this sequence is intended to get viewers as tightly wound as possible in preparation for the imminent climax. In a quick succession of shots, we see Clayton trying to reach someone by phone and not getting through so he gets up and leaves the office. We see Ed leaning ominously over a sleeping Peg and then covering her with a blanket

before moving to a closet and retrieving and loading a pump action shotgun. He loads it and cocks the weapon all while staring down at Peg's sleeping figure on his couch.

In the sequence's most on-the-nose pairing of shots, the camera is placed at Ed's waist-level but all we see of him as he advances toward Peg is the barrel of the shotgun. As he approaches her, the barrel is exactly level with her head. It's not pointed at her, but the way the shot is arranged, the long, dark barrel of the gun and its proximity to her head are unsettling to say the least. He stands above his girlfriend, almost caressing the chamber of the shotgun. In the very next shot, we see Clayton's Kirtland County Sheriff's cruiser whipping around a street corner, tires squealing as he goes. He pulls up to the front of a small, white house and limps to the front door. Ed sits down on the couch near Peg's feet. He caresses her leg over the blanket that covers her, the shotgun resting on the arm of the couch, the large business-end of the barrel pointed in the direction of the front door. The obvious equation that Dutcher creates here adds up to: Ed + shotgun + Clayton rushing to the rescue = Ed is the killer and he knows Clayton is on to him. In a close up of Ed's face, he is looking forward, but then, at the moment the viewer hears front-door knocking, Ed looks over in the direction that his shotgun is pointing. The camera cuts to Wes outside on the front porch of the white house. He knocks again, growing impatient. The door opens. Instead of Ed or Peg, we see April, the wife of Terry, Wes's young, enthusiastic deputy.

As first time viewers, we realize Wes was never headed to Ed's house. Upon reflection (and re-viewing), we see that in the shot of his team's drinking classes, Terry's maroon colored mug was right next to Ed's large soda jug. It was Terry that Wes suspected, not Ed at all. By juxtaposing Wes's realization with shots of Ed preparing to defend his girlfriend against a possible attack and even overlapping the sound of Wes knocking on Terry's door with the shot of

Ed casually looking around, Dutcher uses clever film and sound editing tricks to mislead the viewers. The deception provides a moment of pleasurable surprise for viewers and allow them the satisfaction of piecing together the clues of how it all fits together.

Obviously, this sequence apes a very similar one in Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* in which viewers see the inside of killer Buffalo Bill's ramshackle death bunker and the exterior of an entirely different house that Federal agents are approaching. In borrowing from a film, Dutcher chose very high quality, very Hollywood material from which to steal. This sequence is soaked in contemporary Hollywood film and sound editing, performances, and execution. It is intended to be a thrill ride, not a contemplative moment to consider the state of our souls and how they relate to God. It's meant to be awesome, not awe inspiring.

By contrast, there are some moments of profound stillness in the film in which viewers are meant to breathe and ponder. Of course, it is that contrast between the tense build-up and harried action of the Hollywood-style sequences and the stillness and silence of the more Schraderian spiritual film style that creates an LDS spiritual film style. The body and the spirit. The sexy and the sacred. This combination and contrast mimic the mortal experience that Latter-Day Saints (and everyone else, I suppose) experience. It's probably a safe generalization to make to say that every person on earth experiences moments of profound physical excitement – fear, arousal, anger, -- as well as periods of silent, meditative introspection. The Mormon perspective on these varied experiences is that they all belong to God, they all are part of the plan intended to lead back to God's presence. The awesome and the awe inspiring are both essential components to the Mormon experience and, therefore, to any film style attempting to either convey or evoke a Latter-Day Saint world view.

The first and most effective moment of stillness in *Brigham City* occurs early in the film. On their way back from a call to break up a fight at a construction site, Wes and Terry see a red sports car parked in a field near an abandoned, pioneer-era one room house . Wes took note of it on the way out to the call and since it's still there on the way back, he decides to investigate. The setting is a fallow field in a narrow canyon in the foothills above Brigham City (Mapleton, Utah in real life). The film was shot in autumn and so the huge ash, maple, and aspen trees full of orange, yellow, and red leaves. In a setting like that, even the most pedestrian shot takes on a Tarkovsky-like power because of enameled blue sky and the trees and flame-colored field grass moving in the breeze.

The shot lengths begin to grow as Clayton gets closer to his gruesome discovery. After he finds blood and signs of a struggle inside the empty car, he unfastens the clasp on his service weapon and approaches the old house. A ten second pan follows Wes through the windows and cracks from the interior of the house until he comes to the door of the barn and we see a stiff, gray hand frozen in place, sticking up from the bottom of the screen. The camera is low, just above the body on the floor.

For as unsettling as it is, it's a beautifully composed shot. The natural beauty of the sunlit mountains in the background certainly adds to the weird gravitas of the shot, but more than that, there is a tremendous symmetry in the shot that gives it that iconographic sense. Clayton is slightly off-center top right of the screen, his head and shoulders protruding into the blue field of sky and light, and the victim's hand, blood streaked and twisted, descends down into the off-center bottom left of the screen. It is simultaneously grotesque and beautiful. As I wrote, the camera pans around as it follows Clayton to his discovery but then it comes to rest and that extra

second on stillness encourages the viewer to view the scene as an individual moment as well as a piece of an ongoing narrative.

The next significant shot is the lengthiest. After Clayton calls for backup, the camera cuts back to the interior of the house where Terry is kneeling above the camera which is a stand in for the body of the dead girl. Just over his shoulder, initially out in the daylight, Wes stands and gives his deputy instructions. In this shot, Terry looms large. He is in the position of prayer or meditation. His face is lit from the side and slightly below, light ostensibly coming in from cracks and holes in the wall of the house. He appears to be in a position of mourning or sadness, and yet the from-the-floor lighting gives the scene an uncomfortable, horror-movie feeling. It's not clear at this point in the film if it's just the horror of the situation or if there is something else amiss being telegraphed by the lighting. Once the entire film has been viewed, it's clear that Terry isn't as sad about the girl's death as he is about his role in it. Either way, the shot of Terry kneeling and Wes hovering above his right shoulder lasts for thirty two seconds, and the camera is motionless the entire time. Viewers are asked to be still along with the camera and feel the viscerality of the events on screen. They are asked to somehow reconcile the beauty of the shot composition, the lighting, and the textures of the setting with the ugliness what's taken place. It is in Brigham City more than any of the other films in Dutcher's Mormon quartet that these still iconographic moments are used to highlight the ways in which beauty and ugliness, peace and violence, and stillness and chaos coincide and juxtapose.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the final shot of this chain of secular icons. After Wes sends Terry off to retrieve a tow truck for the dead woman's sports car, the sheriff takes crime scene photos with disposable camera. The cheap-sounding click and winding of the camera was no doubt meant to demonstrate how unprepared Clayton and, by extension Brigham

City, is for a crime of this nature, but it also creates a creepy, empty ambiance as it is the only sound through this passage of the film. One also cannot help but feel there might be a meta-filmic moment happening here as the writer/director of the film plays a character trying to line up the best shot possible of the blood spatter on the headrest of the car. Image maker actor as sheriff as image maker makes an interesting moment and causes one to wonder if Dutcher has some designs on making a comment about our culture's leering interest in blood and violence on screen. Clayton the character is clearly uncomfortable with his role as crime scene photographer and so the armchair critic might also wonder if Dutcher wants us to be uncomfortable too with our part in the cycle of producing and consuming violent images. Again, that is perhaps a topic for another project.

The final icon moment takes place when Clayton has taken multiple pictures of the car and has moved into the abandoned house. Framed by the bare, weather-worn logs at either side of the doorless opening to the house and the lacy shadows of leaves dancing on the exterior walls, Clayton stands above the dead body and takes pictures. The interior of the house is dim but there is a silken, reflected quality to the minimal light there is, again similar to what Tarkovsky produced in certain interior shots in films like *Stalker* (1979) and *Nostalghia* (1983). The only sounds are the diseased buzz of the flies now gathering on the corpse and the click and wind of the disposable camera. Clayton stands and then crouches to get the best shot but the camera watching him doesn't move for eleven seconds. Again, through its careful mise en scene, it's clear this shot is intended to make the viewer pause and experience. It is not some workmanlike cutaway shot that merely carries the action from one sequence to the next. On the contrary, like a sudden wide spot in a river, it slows the narrative down and insists it idle if only for a few extra seconds. That space allows the viewer to experience the simultaneity of the pure

aesthetic beauty of film – shot composition, lighting, sound design, performance – while being affected by it in ways that go beyond mere art appreciation. While an LDS spiritual film style doesn't depend solely on stillness the way Paul Schrader's supposedly universal but actually Calvinist style does, stillness and silence are one very important half of the two part body/spirit equation that allows viewers to experience a Mormon transcendent experience. Just as juxtaposition in editing is a key element to modern filmmaking, the larger juxtaposition of contemporary Hollywood flashiness and slow, still, contemplativeness is key to a Mormon Transcendent experience. The sexy and the sacred. The awesome and the awe-inspiring. The ugly and the uplifting.

Shrouded in Darkness: Light Metaphors in *Brigham City*

There are several significant light metaphors throughout *Brigham City* and they operate in very specific scenes but also across the course of the entire film. Again, as in *God's Army*, light is used to symbolize the spiritual state of an individual or, in this case, an entire town. Where there is bright, warm light, chances are that person is righteous, obedient, humble, and, therefore, has the companionship of the Holy Ghost. Where there is darkness, shade, and shadows, chances are that person is somehow spiritually benighted. One element that shows Dutcher's progress as a filmmaker and the development of a more defined LDS spiritual film style is the way he uses light as a symbol over the run of the whole narrative, rather than just in individual scenes.

The film opens at day break. Wes Clayton wakes up in his empty bed, in his empty house It is appropriate that the first shot of the film is of him climbing out of bed as the morning sun enters his bedroom and immediately getting on his knees to pray. The next sequence of Clayton

preparing for the day (putting on his leg brace, holstering his gun, putting his sheriff's badge on) lingers on him as he sits at his kitchen table, slicing bananas onto his cereal while reading and underlining passages from *The Book of Mormon*, each scene becoming progressively more well-lit and brighter.

Starting with light-filled prayer and scripture study is perhaps the most Mormon way a film could begin. Prayer is a staple of most religions but personal, individualized, spoken prayer on bended knee is particularly emphasized in the LDS faith. Not a single church activity – from Sacrament meeting to the Thursday night basketball game or the Saturday night youth dance – begins without an opening invocation asking for protection, guidance, and the presence of the Holy Ghost. When serving as a missionary in the southern states, I counted once how many times I prayed aloud on average in a day. Between praying by myself, with my companion, with the people we taught, and over various meals, I figured I prayed an average of 25 to 30 times a day. Dutcher connecting Clayton's initial prayer and study with a progressive rise in the light of the scenes is purposeful and significant.

Dutcher's depiction of Clayton praying before anything else reflects the teaching of a popular passage from *The Book of Mormon*: "Yea, humble yourselves, and continue in prayer unto him. Cry unto him when ye are in your fields, yea, over all your flocks. Cry unto him in your houses, yea, over all your household, both morning and, mid-day, and evening. . . But this is not all: ye must pour out your souls in your closets, and your secret places, and in your wilderness" (Alma 34.19-26). The opening shots of *BC* do double duty by both depicting Clayton accurately as a devout Mormon trying to do as he's been taught and also by commencing the film as a creative work with prayer. Clayton's prayer begins his day but it also begins the audience's viewing experience. In a meta-filmic way, the first shot of the film is as

much a request for spiritual uplift as any prayer in any Mormon meeting ever was. Clayton's prayer is Dutcher's prayer. Though Mormon prayers are traditionally spoken aloud, the audience never hears what Clayton prays for at the side of his bed. This absence creates a space to be filled by both the audience and the filmmaker. The light in these scenes makes it clear that Clayton is a spiritual man, a character connected to God through the presence of the Holy Ghost in his life. Once he emerges from his house and we get a wide angle shot of the lovely, autumnal, sunlit valley in which he lives, we also get a sense that Brigham City itself is a kind of Edenic, divinely approved place. Multiple shots early in the film also evoke this same sense: Clayton's cruiser leaving eddies of autumn leaves in its wake as it speeds down a curved country road; the sun flaring off brass instruments as a marching band makes its way down Main Street during the annual Brigham Days celebration; even when Wes and Terry return to the canyon in order to practice target shooting and the mountains and trees are all bathed in bright, warm light.

However, as the film progresses, an increasing number of scenes take place at dusk and at night. Young men from the church sent to distribute flyers for the sheriff's office are seen crisscrossing streets and yards as the shadows grow long. The wrap-up of the Brigham Days celebration takes place at dusk as Terry and Stu shovel parade horse manure off the streets in the waning light. Mourners and onlookers stand in the darkness beyond the gazebo as the murdered beauty queen's body is loaded into the coroner's van. By the time the film reaches the first of its climaxes (I argue it has two), the movie has spent over half of its running time set either at dusk or night time. The town and its residents, due to either fear, guilt, sin, or a lack of charity, are disconnected from the Holy Ghost and so are shrouded in darkness.

The first climax of the film is where both Brigham and Wes Clayton are in their darkest place. Clayton has deduced that Terry is the murderer and drives to his house in the middle of the

night to confront him. As he pulls up in front of Terry's house (at the end of the fake-out sequence mentioned in the last section) the screen is almost entirely black. Wes and his car are all jet black silhouettes against the feeble light coming from the porch and streetlight. He may have received a moment of inspiration to figure out Terry's guilt, but there is no clarity, no light to illuminate this moment for Wes.

Inside, Clayton finds Terry at his kitchen table cleaning his dismantled service pistol. The only light in the room is the harsh overhead fixture above the kitchen table. Terry is played by Matthew A. Brown, the actor who played Elder Allen in *God's Army*. There are obvious echoes between the two films. Both have pivotal revelation scenes that involve Brown at a dimly lit kitchen table. The first film's revelation galvanizes a young missionary to further conversion. *Brigham City*'s revelation leads, at least initially, to further darkness. The kitchen scene appears to have no other lighting than just the overhead fixture. There's no additional fill or any other cinematic trick to add to the effect. It is simply Terry's stormy face under one harsh light. Rather than indicating the possibility of heavenly visitation as in *God's Army*, the lighting of this scene suggests a clichéd interrogation room in a police procedural (which, more or less, it is). The shadow's on Terry's face are harsh and add to his suddenly changed countenance. No longer the affable family man, he now appears angry, irritable, even demonic. Instead of looking up as Elder Allen, Brown angles Terry's face downward to emphasize the shadows on his face and turn his gaze into a glare.

The confrontation leads, of course, to Terry's death (an element I'll discuss in the section on violence), but what is significant for this section is what happens after Clayton has shot and killed his deputy. Ordered out of the house by Terry's hysterical, grieving widow, Wes's completely black silhouette backs out of the kitchen and into the hallway where he is briefly

illuminated but then backs into a shadowy corner and sinks to the ground. His laconic demeanor finally breaks and he begins to sob. As he does so, the screen fades to black.

Mormons don't believe in hell per se, as in a red, fiery place with lost souls wailing in flaming pits. Rather, Latter-Day Saints believe that most references to hell simply have to do with the state of being unrepentant sinners will find themselves in once they are separated from their loved ones and separated from God in the afterlife due to their lack of faithfulness. Mormonism is generally a hopeful religion though because in its cosmology, "hell has an end. The spirits there will be taught the gospel, and sometime following their repentance they will be resurrected to a degree of glory of which they are worthy. Those who will not repent, but are nevertheless not sons of perdition, will remain in hell throughout the Millennium. After these thousand years of torment, they will be resurrected to a telestial glory" ("Hell").

However, beyond the run-of-the-mill unrepentant sinner, there is another level of punishment for "those who are not redeemed by the atonement of Jesus Christ. In this sense, hell is permanent. It is for those who are found 'filthy still.' This is the place where Satan, his angels, and the sons of perdition—those who have denied the Son after the Father has revealed him—will dwell eternally. The scriptures sometimes refer to hell as *outer darkness*" ("Hell" emphasis added). In other words, the most profound punishment and the absolute worst state of being possible in the LDS worldview is to be without light, to be as far away from the source of light and life as possible. That, to a Mormon, is hell.

So when Wes literally sinks into the darkness after killing Terry, he is descending into his own personal hell. The fade to black is not just some arbitrarily chosen technique to transition to the next scene. On the contrary, it is a meaningful stylistic choice on Dutcher's part that is a concrete link between how the film is actually constructed and the religious/spiritual worldview

the film portrays. The darkness that Wes and Brigham City encounter is meant to be shared with the audience for a time. Especially in the Latter-Day Saint way of seeing the world, one cannot experience the Divine without also experiencing its opposite. A film not made in the LDS spiritual style easily might have ended here, the murderer dead, the hero conflicted but victorious, darkness all around. However, Terry's death is only the climax of the police procedural aspect of the movie. Since the second, perhaps more important conflict is over the spiritual innocence and/or experience of Wes Clayton and Brigham City as a whole, there is still one more major resolution at which the viewer needs to arrive. While I will discuss that second, more significant climax in greater detail later as it relates to both the section of this chapter on violence and the one on ordinances, the metaphor of light-as-spirit does play in a role in it.

As at the beginning of the film, the next scene following Terry's death begins with light breaking into Wes Clayton's bedroom. Wes is perched at the end of his bed, obviously ruminating about his guilt over killing his friend and his role in giving a badge and a gun to a rapist and murderer without so much as a background check. He is illuminated. Light reflects from the window onto the mirror he's staring into, and it is clear that, despite his feelings, the spiritual night of fear, the darkness brought by Terry's activities is at an end. The scene cuts to an exterior establishing shot of the LDS chapel where Wes presides over his ward. The sky is white, the puffy clouds hanging over the chapel are lined in silver, and the entire shot is almost washed out with light. It isn't a warm, happy illumination – but it is Sunday, the killer is dead, and light has returned to Brigham/*Brigham*. After its long descent into darkness, the redemptive climax of the film's spiritual narrative happens in the light, rather than ending with the procedural narrative that closes in darkness. As Mormon doctrine is essentially an optimistic, positive way of looking

at the world, it is fitting that films reflecting and constructed with that doctrine should end with light.

This is not to say that each ending is "happy." Rather the endings (at least of the first three in the quartet) are mixed – in *God's Army*, yes, Allen encounters a spiritual conversion and becomes a "successful" missionary, but Dalton is dead and Kinegar is gone. But despite the more bitter elements of the story, the film ends bathed in light. *Brigham City* has an even more complicated resolution. The killer has been discovered and killed. The town is safe, and peace can return. However, the murderer is a trusted member of the community and his executioner is both the one responsible for giving Terry the ability to stalk and kill more easily and Wes is also a Bishop and, therefore, supposed to be a figure of ministering and healing, not an instrument of death. So a film made in the LDS spiritual film style will have a light-filled ending, but that light will shine on the dual nature of the world it depicts – one that is both happy and sad, triumphant and defeated, physical and spiritual. So while *Brigham City* does end with light and the restoration of the spiritual connectivity characters were missing for much of the film's running time, it is not the easy, walking-off-into-the-sunset, ding-dong-the-killer's-dead conclusion that a traditional Hollywood film might offer. The primary element that tempers the "happy ending" in *Brigham City* and the most prominent component of LDS spiritual film style most at work in the movie in it is that of violence.

Strong Violence/Strong Salvation

Violence is much more prevalent in *Brigham City* than in *God's Army*. In that first film, the actual depiction is limited to one on-screen scuffle that is over as soon as it begins. Even the off-screen violence of Benny's assault is handled briefly and moved along quickly in order to make room for the resultant miracle about to take place. In his second film, Dutcher chose a

narrative that literally depends on assault and violent death. In this way, the progression of LDS spiritual film style in his work takes a step forward. What Devin McKinney calls "strong violence" is central and essential to LDS doctrine and, therefore, to an LDS film style. "Strong violence" is the on-screen (or implied) act of violence that actually costs the characters in the film and the viewer something to participate in it. It is not the ridiculous, throwaway mayhem that happens in Hollywood blockbusters where dozens of nameless villains line up only to be quickly dispatched by the hero. It is when bones break, flesh tears, blood is shed and it both matters to the narrative of the film and there is a kind of emotional, psychic, or, one could say, spiritual loss that occurs on the part of the viewer. It is violence with actual consequence.

Brigham City's violence, while certainly nothing spectacular or even noteworthy by Hollywood's standards, does qualify as "strong." It is never employed in an exploitive way, is always intended to move the spiritual progression (or decay) of characters forward, and is clearly intended to involve and invest viewers. That investment, again, is not simply of the sake of shock or "Oh, that's too bad that character died" types of reactions. Rather, it is the first of the one-two punch of LDS spiritual film style. Violence's primary purpose is to serve as a concrete reminder of and a narrative necessity for the necessity of salvation. When violence occurs in a film made in the LDS spiritual film style, it is always in order to create an opportunity for its effects to be healed and redeemed. In other words, in the LDS worldview, violence (whether it is spiritual, physical, or otherwise) serves the purpose of salvation. It happens so we can either be saved or healed from it. Dutcher's films were the first to begin to explore to prominent but little considered idea in Mormon theology.

Like the darkness in the movie, the depictions of violence grow and intensify over the course of the film. The first moment the viewer gets the sense that, to use Stu the deputy's

metaphor, a serpent has entered paradise is when Wes and Terry come upon the abandoned sports car near the dilapidated house. When Wes approaches it, he sees red, sticky-looking blood spattered across the headrest and steering wheel. A bloody print sits on the passenger seat where the victim obviously placed her hand after being attacked. It's a grim, gruesome image and not one that the camera lingers on, but it is explicit enough to demonstrate that this film's level of violence will be higher than that of Dutcher's previous film. (Incidentally, Dutcher is clearly a big fan of the symbolic power of the color red. It figures prominently in *States of Grace* but is used most extensively here – the sports car is red, the blood is red, the unifying link between the majority of the victims is red hair. It's an obvious symbol but not an ineffective one.)

The blood leads to the body. The violence becomes more concrete as Clayton is seen standing above the dead gray hand frozen in a rictus of pain. The viewer never gets a clear shot of the girl's body, the shadowy mass at the corner of the screen is somehow more unsettling because it doesn't really resemble a human. The girl from the red sports car has been violently reduced from a recognizable being to what almost appears to be a black, inky smudge in the corner as a sheriff stands over her, snapping photos on a disposable camera.

The death of Carolyn Merrill, the local "Miss Brigham City" beauty queen is the next step in the progression of violence in the film. She's found on a Sunday by an early morning trash picker and his dog who are in the city park. The dog wants something from under the gazebo and when his own checks to see what the dog is so interested in, he pulls out the blood spattered sash Merrill was wearing the parade the day before. When the sheriff is alerted (taken from his duties as Bishop on a Sunday morning), he pries up some lattice and crawls under the gazebo and through the dirt and bugs in his Sunday best only to find Merrill's body, still in her pageant gown (now streaked with red) and her strawberry blond hair knotted with dried clumps

of blood. The black cave underneath the gazebo is even darker and more lightless than the abandoned house where the woman from the sports car was left. As the violence intensifies, so does the spiritual darkness the characters experience.

The intensity level and on-screen explicitness doubles later in the film as Clayton and his team conduct their fingerprint-lifting sting at the (only) local bar. Deputy Stu, played with typical Western gruffness by Hollywood standby and ethnic Mormon Wiford Brimley, stops at the local convenience store on his way back to the sheriff's office from the sting. Overcome by the temptations he encountered while waiting for bottles at the bar, Stu wants to revisit an old habit from his younger days and buy a pack of cigarettes. (Most Mormons, of course, obey what they call "The Word of Wisdom," which is essentially a health code that involves no alcohol, no drugs, and no tobacco.) The character working behind the counter, a young woman named Jamie, was established early in the film as a faithful Latter-Day Saint and neighbor to Wes. When she initially refuses to sell the cigarettes to him, he gets huffy and insists. He takes his smokes and heads out to his truck, only to discover that, as would be the case with most Mormons, he doesn't have a light. Frustrated, he stares up at the ceiling of his darkened truck and says, "You just won't make it easy for me, will ya?" Returning to the store for matches, the front counter area is a mess. The till hangs open, brightly colored candy is spilled all over the floor, and the novelty Mexican jumping beans tick and jump as Stu calls out for Jamie who is nowhere to be seen. A trail of papers and candy leads to the storage and bathroom area at the back of the store.

Stu then draws his weapon and it is clear that violence is imminent. The camera shifts from stationary to handheld and it follows Stu's bulky shoulders down the hallway. The viewer is shifted from observer to participant. The hallway is shadowy and dim compared to the front area of the store. As Stu approaches violence, he walks into darkness, the long barrel of his old

fashioned service revolver visible in almost every shot. He throws open two doors – one to a completely darkened office and another to one of the bathrooms. Neither room contains Jamie. (One would think that a seasoned police officer like Stu would think to turn on the lights in that darkened office, but, alas, he does not.) The third door reveals the red-headed young woman bound and gagged with thick, black electrician's tape, on the floor next to a urinal.

From the moment Stu opens the bathroom door, there are eight shots in approximately ten seconds. First the reverse shot from Jamie's p.o.v. showing Stu opening the door. Then a low angle, medium shot of Jamie struggling on the floor, then a cut-in to a close up of her face crying. The camera returns to a medium shot of Stu looking concerned and confused and, at that moment, a gloved hand with a silver, snub nose revolver appears from behind Wes, pointing the gun at his temple. The camera returns to the close-up of Jamie as she squeals, seeing what's about to happen. In a close-up of Stu's face, Jamie's assailant cocks the gun just as Stu looks sideways out of the corner of his eye. The murderer pulls the trigger and the camera cuts away first to a medium shot and then to a close up of Jamie reacting to Stu's death. Some of the shots last for literally less than half a second. The longest shot is the close-up of Jamie's reaction. The camera lingers there as she cries in horror. This lingering demonstrates that this is not intended to be the "crap violence that we all drink like beer" but rather that it carries consequences that "distinguish the strong violence from the weak" (McKinney) There is sorrow, loss, and horror in Stu's abrupt death. The editing is all Hollywood thriller, but the tone is anything but exploitive or throwaway. The violence here does more than just forward the plot – it escalates the need for light, the need for redemption, the need for some kind of holy intervention. In the following scene, when the store is surrounded by police tape and sirens, Wes Clayton enters (the handheld camera following him from behind in much the same way as it followed Stu down that dim

hallway), and he sees Stu's body on the floor and a red spatter of blood on the door frame. With this sequence, instead of merely finding aftermath, the film takes the new step of actually showing the violence as it is happening. Dutcher ups the ante here and makes a significant shift in LDS spiritual film style. Acknowledging the centrality and necessity of violence in Mormon doctrine, history, and culture, the film moves from the relatively soft handling of violence to harder, more explicit depictions – not for the sake of leering exploitation, not simply for use as a set piece, but as an important filmic component that reflects a Latter-Day Saint way of viewing the world and an inherently Mormon narrative.

Stu's death and Jamie's abduction set the stage for the final and most significant act of violence in the film. In the sequences described earlier, Clayton resorts to all methods, both legal and less-than-legal, to track down Jamie and stop the murderer. The town is searched, hundreds of beer bottles are dusted for prints, and finally Wes (thanks to inspiration, apparently) figures out the problem. Following the fake out sequence, he turns up at Terry's door, where he finds his young deputy unable to sleep and occupying himself by cleaning and assembling his pistol. As the conversation commences and Terry's guilt is spelled out, he slowly continues to reassemble his gun, continually making violence more and more imminent. Terry, whose real name is never revealed, is actually an ex-convict who spent four years in jail for raping a girl in Arizona. Upon his release, he assumed the identity of a returned missionary/Eagle Scout/upstanding citizen and fled north to the heart of Mormonism, to the mountains of Utah where he could start over without the baggage of his past being known. Terry points out his own duplicity and outsider status as he taunts Clayton. "This whole thing is your fault. You put a badge on me and a gun in my hand. You're supposed to protect this town from people like me. You never even checked my background. What were you thinking? You brought the wolf right into the center of the flock."

By associating himself with the image of a predatory animal, Terry once again heightens the likelihood of violence.

In the final moments of the showdown, Terry's gun is complete and resting in his hand on the table while Clayton's is drawn, cocked, and pointed directly at his deputy's head. Terry asks, "What do you think, Wes? When I raise this gun, am I going to point it at my head or yours?" He loads the clip into the gun and says, "Tell them I'm sorry, Wes – when you see those girls, you tell them I'm sorry." He then quickly raises his gun to fire at Wes but is immediately shot through the head and knocked to the ground. Terry's wife, April, has come in on the final moments of his confession and throws herself over her husband's body as his blood runs down the kitchen cabinets behind them. She's screaming and crying, their infant child in the next room is wailing, blood spatters the kitchen cabinets – it is a moment of great chaos, darkness, and unrest. Terry's continual acts of violence and Wes's act of preventative violence have brought both the characters and the film to its darkest, lowest point. As I have said, violence is a central element in Mormon doctrine and in an LDS spiritual film style because it creates opportunities for healing and salvation. In this particular film, that second hit of the violence/salvation one-two punch is intrinsically connected to the ordinance of the Sacrament.

Taking Christ's Name: Priesthood Ordinances in *Brigham City*

There are three Priesthood ordinances depicted in *Brigham City*. One baptism and two administrations of the Sacrament. The depiction of the baptism is very brief is treated almost as an incidental throwaway scene. Peg's boyfriend and first-class red herring, Ed, is not a member of the church but is clearly intending to join. Just between Wes and Terry target practicing up in the canyon and the deputies prepping for their beer-bottle-fingerprint sting, the scene turns to an

LDS baptismal font in a Mormon meeting house. Ed and Terry, both dressed entirely in white, descend into a small font. Wes, as Bishop, officiates and watches to ensure the ordinance is performed correctly. Peg, the doting girlfriend, beams from the crowd of onlookers and well-wishers. Terry recites the entire baptismal prayer, one of the very few LDS prayers that have set wording, and then immerses Ed entirely under the water and brings him back up again. Ed smiles, Peg smiles, Wes smiles. Everybody is happy. Again, the simultaneous centrality and quotidian nature of ordinances in a Mormon's life are depicted here. They are important, literally eternally significant events but also common, everyday things that take place with great regularity in most member's lives. The complication introduced by this particular depiction of this ordinance is that the baptism is performed by Terry who, we learn at the end of the film, is both a rapist and a murderer. The priesthood authority that Mormons hold sacred and believe sets them apart from every other religion in the world is based on righteousness and personal purity. In a section of LDS scripture known as The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood, church members are told "That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness. That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man" (DC 121.36-37). In other words, if a priesthood holder is guilty of unrepented sin, he doesn't actually have the priesthood at that moment. This returns to the idea of how fluid spiritual connectedness is for Mormons. One moment you could wield the same power that parted the Red Sea or raised Lazarus and in the next moment,

depending on your actions and internal spiritual state, you could have nothing. Terry being obviously unrepentant of some of the very gravest of sins couldn't possibly be a worthy priesthood holder at the time he baptized Ed. This raises thorny, complicated questions for Latter-Day Saints because, while probably very few priesthood holders are secret murderers (hopefully none), everyone is fallen, everyone is sinful. So at what point do mundane, everyday sins cross over into full unworthiness? And if a priesthood holder administers an ordinance while unworthy, like Terry, what happens to the people who were supposed to be blessed by it? Are their blessings withheld? Is Ed not really washed clean through the ordinance of baptism because it was done by someone so blatantly evil? This complication is also a step forward in terms of LDS film style. In *God's Army*, it was enough to depict ordinances and take them seriously as spiritually efficacious events. But with *Brigham City*, Dutcher doesn't just repeat himself but instead uses this inherently Mormon content to raise interesting questions and make a film that cuts more closely to the cultural bone than before.

The most significant use of priesthood ordinances in the film is the portrayal of the administration of the Sacrament. Partaking of bread and water is a weekly ritual in the Mormon faith and represents, among other things, a regular renewal of baptismal covenants, a spiritual cleaning and renewal, and a member's willingness to "take (Christ's) name upon" them. Traditionally, the young men, Deacons, who administer the Sacrament offer it to the Bishop first and the rest of the congregation follows.

As I mentioned earlier, there are two Sacrament services in the film. The first takes place just after the woman with the sports car has been discovered. Brigham is still an impenetrable paradise that just happened to have a minor blip as some poor out of towner happened to meet her untimely end there. ("We could have been any exit off the highway," Wes tells Terry,

insisting that the woman's murder doesn't really have anything to do with Brigham itself.) The sky above the meeting house in the establishing shot is blue and sunny. The congregation sings the LDS hymn, "Come, Come Ye Saints," the ending lyrics of which are "All is well, all is well." Following a set prayer, young men called deacons take silver trays first of torn up bread to every member and then, after another, separate prayer, trays of tiny cups of water. Wes, as Bishop, takes the first bite of bread and the first cup of water, after which the rest of the congregation partakes.

This sequence doesn't include the entire Sacrament process – it cuts from young men preparing the bread during the hymn directly to the blessing and passing of the water. Nevertheless, it is nearly two full minutes of almost entirely wordless screen time. There are various shots of different characters drinking the water and passing the trays. Wes looks on as his congregation renews the covenants they made when they were baptized. Other than the amount of time spent on something so quiet and mundane, there is nothing unusual or dramatic about this sequence. It is obviously intended to establish what is "normal" for uninitiated viewers so they will understand the utter unorthodoxy of what happens the second time the Sacrament is passed.

As in *God's Army*, immediately following the depiction of violence, redemption comes. In this case, following Wes Clayton shooting Terry to death, the scene shifts to the next Sunday and Sacrament meeting. These circumstances are different, of course, than the first time viewers watched the Sacrament being passed. Rather than the Edenic paradise we saw earlier, this congregation is sad, weary, and ashamed. Wes himself arrives late to the meeting, as though he only just barely brought himself to attend the meeting at which he is supposed to preside. The congregational hymn this time is "Nearer My God To Thee," a song of reconciliation and longing, rather than one of peace and satisfaction.

Spencer, the young man who presents the tray of torn up bread to Wes, is the twelve-year old brother of Jamie, Terry's last victim. Earlier in the film, just after the girl went missing, Wes promised the boy that he would find and save his sister. In the meeting, he looks at Spencer as he holds the tray out to him and then refuses it. He shakes his head and indicates that he won't take the bread. Needless to say, this is unheard of in regular Mormon experience. Not taking the Sacrament is an outward sign of unworthiness and is usually looked upon as socially awkward by church members to say the least. For the Bishop who is generally taken to be the spiritual paragon of the congregation to refuse it is momentous.

Spencer is stymied and so moves on to the Bishop's two counselors who, following Clayton's symbolic act, refuse as well. The trays are passed around the entire chapel and everyone passes it on without partaking, representing their communal faultiness, their joint weakness. Wes feels at fault for having failed to protect his flock both spiritually and physically. The rest of the congregation, no doubt, feels the weight of the suspicion, distrust, and resentment they experienced toward their fellow members.

Spencer returns to Wes and holds the tray out again. His feelings of guilt acknowledged publicly, Wes tentatively takes a piece of bread and puts it in his mouth as though it's the first food he's had in weeks. The trays go around the chapel again, this time everyone taking a piece and passing it along, tears on the faces of most of the adults. While Clayton's initial act and that of the congregation is one of guilt, the eventual acceptance of the Sacrament represents an acceptance of the possibility of forgiveness and renewal despite that guilt.

In Dutcher's filmic world, this kind of sacramental moment is impossible without the lit fuse of violence to make it happen. Grace is offered and spiritual maturation only takes place *after* a violent fall. Loss of innocence and the acquisition of experience for Dutcher's characters

always comes in the form of broken bones and ruptured flesh. It could be argued that these moves are symbolic of Christ or that these gestures are meant to signify what he sees as the combat between the flesh and the spirit. Either way, his use of violence as a catalytic agent for the enactment of salvation (spiritual or physical) is something inherent to the Latter-Day Saint way of thinking and, therefore, inherent to an LDS spiritual film style.

Chapter Six

***States of Grace*: Crowning Glory**

The third film in the quartet, *States of Grace,* represents the apex of Dutcher's attempts at a Mormon spiritual film style. The film returns to the southern California mission of the first movie but with a new pair of missionary companions. Rather than a greenhorn fresh off the plane, the story focuses on an Elder who is just days from finishing his two-year term of service. His and his companion's lives intersect with those of a gang member, a street preacher, and a struggling actress.

Visually, the film has a burnished, almost enameled texture to it, taking full advantage of its California beachside setting. There is more ambitious content, including a drive-by shooting attack early in the film shot with handheld cameras and edited in quick, chaotic bursts as well as an almost Coppola-esque sequence alternating back and forth between the peaceful chapel-set confirmation of one brother and the violent stabbing and death of another brother.

States of Grace is the most complete and polished of the first three films in terms of narrative and technical accomplishment. It is also the most overt in its use of light as a symbol of the Spirit and in the ways in which it introduces silence and stillness. A Ferris wheel, a glowing clock, and the setting sun all create informal halos for different characters, while subway tunnels, darkened bedrooms, and the cover of night all demonstrate a lack of spiritual connectedness for others.

Dutcher also introduces new forms of stylistic stillness in *States of Grace*. Rather than just individual shots that suggest transcendence in immanence, this film features two very long monologues that feature the stillness and silence of both other characters and non-diegetic sound. The protagonist, Elder Lozano, delivers a monologue in which he tells about the origin of his

gunshot scars (Ferris wheel flickering over his shoulder in the background) while his companion

silently listens, and Holly, a neighbor, tearfully relates her early experiences as an actress trying

to make it in Hollywood, again while Elder Farrell is the silent, listening ear. It is not just a

visual stillness, a motionlessness of the camera as in the first two films, and it demonstrates a

development of the ways in which this particular stylistic element can be employed.

The story focuses on five characters, Mormon missionaries Elders Lozano and Farrell;

the missionaries' next door neighbor, aspiring actress Holly; Carl, a violent gang member who

eventually joins the church; and Louis, a homeless street preacher. While the film represents the

best manifestation of LDS spiritual film style, it is (perhaps because of rather than in spite of that

fact) the most ecumenical of Dutcher's films. The climax does not rest in the triumph of dogma

or efficacy of the LDS-centric Priesthood authority. Instead, the film takes a step back from such

cultural specificity and instead focuses on the underlying messages of Mormonism and how they

relate to Christianity in general. This may seem contrary to Clive Marsh's call for religious

specificity, but it is not. In reality, it gets more at the heart of what Mormonism believes it is than

any other more specific cultural or doctrinal peculiarity. More on that later.

Hollywood Style + Spiritual Style =Mormon Style

It's clear that Dutcher wanted this film to echo or mirror *God's Army* in some ways.

Obviously, the same setting and several returning supporting characters link the films, but it also

has some structural similarities that are worth noting. In *God's Army*, the initial drive-through-

Hollywood montage sets the tone for the rest of the film and signals the films intentions to

combine the physical with the spiritual. *States of Grace* has a very similar opening sequence that accomplishes similar goals.

The film opens with a black screen and then the opening credits presented in the same blocky, white font that characterized *God's Army's* titles. Under that familiar starkness, however, is a raucous, twanging rendition of the traditional Christian hymn, "I'm a Soldier in the Army of the Lord" by Josh Aker. Following the words "A Richard Dutcher film" and "States of Grace," the black screen immediately gives way to an in media res scene of a group of Mormon missionaries playing basketball on a beachside court. The music intensifies as we see Elder Downey (introduced at the end of *God's Army* as Allen's replacement companion for the departed Dalton), Elder Mangum, former housemate of Dalton and Allen, and several other young men who are obviously also missionaries. The fluid, handheld camera follows the action as the men navigate the court, weaving around each other, shooting baskets, and trash talking. The majority of the shot time focuses on a handsome Latino man who we later learn is Elder Lozano. Cutaway shots reveal two sister missionaries sitting in bleachers cheering on the men and another Elder, fully dressed in his missionary garb, also sitting on the bleachers reading a copy of James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*, a staple of LDS supplementary, pseudo-scripture. We find later that the uptight stick-in-the-mud on the bleachers is Elder Farrell, companion to Elder Lozano. The entire sequence lasts one minute and twenty three seconds and, in that time, there are 35 different shots following the action. The camera movement is fluid, often following the ball from someone's outstretched hands over the basket and back, and the editing is quick and sharp. It is difficult to not tap one's toe when watching the sequence, not just because of the engaging, propulsive music, but because of the kinetic rhythm established by the editing and camera movement. It may not be hard to film basketball players playing a game, but to film it,

edit it, and put it to music in an effective way that both tells the story and actually physically involves the viewer is slick, effective Hollywood filmmaking at its best. It doesn't make a viewer ponder one's relationship to Deity, but it does make me want to shake my butt a little. This sequences seems, to my eyes, one of the most autoethnographic in all of Dutcher's work, and it is because of the contrast between the raucous physicality of the missionaries here and the quieter brushes with Transcendence that come later. Dutcher served a mission for the LDS church as a young man, and so he knows these nineteen, twenty, and twenty one year old men can switch back and forth, almost instantaneously at times, from the kind of utterly immature foolishness to which men of that age are sometimes prone to the most serious, focused, reverent attention. The basketball game with its smack talk and posturing rings very true to the average LDS missionary experience (at least it does to mine and most everyone I know who served a mission). The fact that these missionaries then follow the game by putting on ties and name tags and having serious, even life threatening experiences while trying to bring other people closer to God absolutely represents fairly universal cultural experience of one branch of LDS life. The combination of the physical, the raucous, the slick, the dangerous, the exciting with the more traditionally sacred or contemplative elements later mirrors what it is like to try to be a twenty year old man serving a mission and what it's like to the a Latter-Day Saint in general in the world. The physical and the spiritual co-exist, sometimes contributing to one another, sometimes combating each other, always belonging side by side because that is part of the plan Mormons believe God has for them. By experiencing both and living through and with the ways in which they complement and contrast, Latter-Day Saints have greater capacity to understand the world and its inhabitants in the way God understands them. That capacity and potential for empathy therefore potentially

empowers Mormons to become more like God, which is ultimately the end goal of Mormon existence. .

There are other highly traditional Hollywood stylistic and content elements in the film. Certainly, the performances are as expressive as any given in Dutcher's movies. Professional bit players and character actors like Jo-Sei Ikeda and J.J. Boone add an emotional resonance to the film that some of the less experienced actors in the quartet can't quite match. Being set beachside in Santa Monica, California, there are ample opportunities to feature beautiful people (honestly, almost exclusively women) in bathing suits, playing volleyball or just strolling down the street. None of those shots have a particularly documentary feel, but rather have the sense of Dutcher winking at the audience through the camera as if to say, "Nice, huh?" There is obviously some of Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" blatantly at work here.

Perhaps the most traditionally Hollywood style sequence in the entire film takes place just moments after the basketball montage. The game is over and Elders Lozano and Farrell are both in their missionary uniforms, walking down a narrow sidewalk on their way to an appointment. Distracted by one of the aforementioned beautiful young women in a bikini, they accidentally bump into three African American men at an intersection. The men, obviously identified as gang members by their dress and the fact that they're carrying guns, immediately take the offensive and start shoving the missionaries. "Watch where you walkin' Jesus freak!" etc. This charged section of sequence is filmed entirely with a handheld cameras and it shakily prowls around the circle of men, looking over the gang members' shoulders at the missionaries, making the men in white shirts and name tags look small and powerless within the frame. The camera is constantly in motion and the editing is lightning fast. Twenty seven shots happen in fifty six seconds. The viewer is meant to feel utterly present in the moment of this conflict,

threatened and uncertain of what's going to happen next. Involvement rather than reflection, adrenaline rather than inspiration are what's being sought here.

Dutcher also uses clever sound editing to emphasize the intensity of the scene. Every time the lead gang member shoves one of the missionaries, it makes a loud, tactile, almost rush-like sound. It's not overtly non-diegetic, but it seems clear upon repeat viewing that it's not a sound that shoving someone would actually make. But this subtle choice amps up the feeling of danger and imminent violence in the scene. The gang members try to start a confrontation and the missionaries, mostly due to Lozano's cool head, refuse to engage. At one point, the lead gang member lifts his shirt, revealing a pistol tucked into his waist band. "You want some of this?" he asks. Lozano pushes Farrell away from the men and the two intend to continue on to their appointment.

However, in the next moment, even as they're walking away, handheld camera still bobbing along, following them, we heard the sound of squealing car tires, and it's apparent something bad is about to happen. A blue car whips around the corner, and a Latino man with a bandana covering the lower half of his face bandit-style leans out of the passenger side window with an automatic weapon. The missionaries see him, dive for cover, and the bullets begin to erupt from the gun. From the moment the missionaries are walking away until Elder Lozano kneels down in front of the wounded gang leader who was shoving him around moments before, only a minute and fifteen seconds elapse. But in that brief period of time, there are fifty five individual shots, all hand-held.

The street where the scene takes place has pedestrians and some small vendor stalls. The stalls and their wares practically explode. Car windows burst and glass flies. Gang members scatter, and we see the leader knocked over by shots to the abdomen. Perhaps most familiar,

"Hollywood" moment of all is a small girl standing stock still in the middle of the street, frozen in either fear or lack of comprehension. Bullets fly and here is a helpless innocent in the midst of it all. Her mother, pinned behind a garbage can, screams her name. Lozano darts out, scoops the girl up, and shelters her behind a parked car. The gunman's weapon jams momentarily which allows one of the other gang members to grab a handgun and start firing back. The rival gang members take off, the back windshield of the blue car shattering as they speed away. As immediate and visceral as the sequence is, there is a very familiar quality to the whole thing. It is crowd-pleasing, Hollywood blockbuster style moviemaking from the script to the final color corrections. It is meant for fun, not faith.

Dutcher uses silence and stillness as a counterpoint to these flashier, more traditionally "crowd pleasing" elements. In this film, while he still embraces the Tarkovsky-like icon shots at key moments, he develops a new and perhaps more fully "Mormon" approach to stillness. In *States of Grace*, Dutcher employs motionless camera work, limited editing, and non-diegetic silence during two long monologues to emphasize both the difference between and the Mormon interconnectedness of Hollywood filmmaking and Schraderian spiritual film style. Both monologues are confessions of sorts. The first is delivered by Lozano, and it details his involvement with a gang as a young man and also his conversion to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The second is given by Holly, the Elders' next door neighbor, and in it she confesses about her brief involvement in the porn industry while trying to make it as an actress in Hollywood. Both monologues are unusually long and deliberately edited for any mainstream American film. But their stillness and their slowness intertwines with the faster, more commercial elements of the film to make something that is both viscerally exciting and spiritually transcendent.

Confession plays a major role in Mormon doctrine as it does in most Christian religions. Latter-Day Saints interpret the scriptural use of the word in two ways: "In one sense, to confess is to state one's faith in something, such as to confess that Jesus is the Christ. In another sense, to confess is to admit one's guilt, such as in a confession of sins. It is a duty of all persons to confess all their sins to the Lord and obtain his forgiveness. When necessary, sins should be confessed to the person or persons sinned against. Serious sins should be confessed to a Church official (in most cases the bishop)" ("Confess, Confession"). There is the confession *of* God and then there is the confession *to* God. So for Mormons, confession is an act of unloading one's sins, but it is also a declaration of faith or belief. It is not just something the desperate and guilty do, but rather it is something the faithful and hopefully faithful do as a way of being cleansed and galvanized along the way to righteousness.

Of course, *States of Grace* doesn't handle these confessions in such a traditional, straightforward way. Instead, much like how *Brigham City* raised prickly questions about worthiness and Priesthood ordinances, this third film of Dutcher's addresses confession in a more complicated and compelling manner. Traditionally in the Mormon culture, both kinds of confession happen in more formal settings. The faith-affirming confessing of God often (but certainly not always) takes place in a monthly Sunday service called "testimony meeting." The entire hour-long service is devoted to whatever members of the congregation feel motivated to come to the pulpit and "bear testimony." Members speak extemporaneously and express their faith in God, Christ, church leaders, various aspects of church doctrine, etc. While no one is limited to such a setting when it comes to confessing God, it is the most overt and public arena in which it's usually done. Confession of sins, while much less public, still has a very formal element to it. While Mormons don't use confession booths or seek declarations of "forgiveness"

from a priest, they do meet in a small, private office with their Bishop to detail the serious sins of which they are guilty and seek counsel for how to proceed with the repentance process. Depending on the severity of the sin, repentance could mean anything from a mild exhortation to do better going forward to excommunication from the church. Either way, it is emphasized again and again in church talks and literature that confession of serious sins must take place with a Bishop. As recently as 2013 there was an article published in the *New Era*, a monthly magazine aimed at Mormon teenagers, entitled, "Why and What Do I Need to Confess to My Bishop?" (Grow). In it, church leader C. Scott Grow states, "Although your parents and leaders can provide necessary support and counsel, the Lord has declared that the bishop is a common judge in Israel (see D&C 107:72, 74). He has the responsibility to determine the worthiness of the members of his ward. By ordination and righteous living, the bishop is entitled to revelation from the Holy Ghost regarding the members of his ward, including you" (Grow). In LDS doctrine, confession to a Bishop is an essential step in receiving forgiveness for sins.

Lozano's confession isn't necessarily one of repentance, but it isn't exactly a confession of God either. Following the drive-by shooting mentioned earlier, Lozano sees that the lead gang member (we learn his name is Carl) who had been harassing them only moments before has been shot. The missionary whips off his tie and pulls off his shirt to use as tourniquets to stop the bleeding until an ambulance arrives. His bare torso reveals both gang tattoos and scars from bullet wounds. The reaction shot of Farrell, already painted a naïve and somewhat uptight, is priceless. He sees the word "Lozano" tattooed across his companion's shoulders and the image of a dagger wrapped in thorny vines along his spine and the look on Farrell's face is one of confusion, fear, and disgust.

Later, back at their apartment after they've accompanied Carl to the hospital and checked in with their mission president (again played by John Pentecost, another holdover character and actor from *God's Army*), Farrell accidentally walks in on Lozano lifting up his shirt and looking at his tattoos and scars in the mirror. It's clear from Farrell's reactions that he has never seen Lozano without his shirt. He apologizes for walking in on him and excuses himself. Lozano returns to the bedroom they share, sits down on his bunk, and begins telling the story of his past. In short, as a teenager he was injured by rival gang members while he tried to rob a pharmacy as part of his initiation into his brothers' gang. In the hospital, he happened to share a room with an LDS missionary who was recovering from being hit by a car while on his bicycle. He and the missionary became friends and Lozano soon joined the church. He compares himself to the missionary from the hospital. "When he got out (of the hospital) he baptized about thirty people before he left (his mission). I was the first one. He was a great missionary. He really made a difference. . . I think I was a better convert than a missionary. I was a good story – a gang kid who gets baptized? Goes on a mission even? Woo. I just don't think I turned into much of a missionary."

This is not Lozano's confession of the power of his testimony nor is it him admitting his grievous sins. Instead, it is more like he's confessing his mediocrity, his lack. Rather than a resounding declaration of spiritual belief or a dramatic description of the horrible things he's done (his pharmacy robbery was interrupted before it even really began by the rival gang attack), it is more of a whimper of "I should be better." (This is a sentiment the protagonist of Falling will echo later.) In Dutcher's way, he is portraying a very common occurrence in Latter-Day Saint culture – confession – but allowing for the complexities that Mormons actually experience in their effort to "be better." Lozano's confession makes him neither a spiritual hero nor a valiant

repentant sinner. It makes him a young man trying to negotiate his faith (or lack thereof) in the liminal space between the image his culture expects (an unquestioning, workhorse of a missionary who brings dozens of people "into the fold" while never equivocating about obedience or rules) and who he actually is in that moment (a not-terribly motivated missionary who has had limited "success" in terms of baptizing new members and a lukewarm devotion to following the strict rules for Elders).

The sequence in which Lozano confesses his mediocrity is three and a half minutes long and contains twenty seven shots, of which there are essentially only four kinds – medium shot of Lozano sitting on his bed, close-up of Lozano, medium shot of Farrell listening, and close up of Farrell. For three and a half minutes, Dutcher alternates between these four shots and allows the camera to linger. One single shot of Lozano describing the attack outside the pharmacy lasts for twenty seven seconds. Fifteen percent of the sequence's running time is spent on one static close-up shot of Lozano's relatively impassive face.

There is no music, no sound of any sort really other than Lozano's voice and, once, Farrell's. Neither actor moves throughout the scene except for minor nods of the head or sideways glances. It is almost glacially still, especially in comparison to the camera fluidity and editing freneticism of the basketball montage and the drive-by shooting sequence. Here, viewers are asked to slow down, to think as well as feel. It is the Latter-Day Saint combination of the physical and spiritual, the crest and valley of Hollywoodism and formal stillness that allows viewers to experience a Mormon sense of the world and Transcendence. A drive-by shooting sequence combined with a melancholy confession of lack together make the formalism that evokes Mormon belief. Like Ozu and Bresson in their way, Dutcher uses "form as the primary method of inducing belief. This makes the viewer an active participant in the creative process"

(Schrader 61). The faultiness of Lozano's confession (who he addresses, what he confesses) demonstrates his humanity, his fallen nature, his imperfection. He is not the hero of a "religious" film. He is not Judah Ben Hur, Marcellus Gallio, or even Kirk Cameron. His is not the story of some dogmatic victory over non-believers or even over some proscribed sin.

With the second monologue, the one delivered by Holly about her past, Dutcher takes this kind of stillness to a new level. Holly befriends the Elders when she helps them care for a homeless man they've taken into their apartment. It's a major breach of missionary protocol to let anyone other than missionaries or church leaders into your apartment, and it is considered utterly forbidden to let in members of the opposite sex, missionary or not. So in a half-hearted attempt to honor some of the rules, the four of them (Holly, the Elders, and Louis, the homeless man they're helping) have dinner together on the roof of the apartment building. Afterwards, Lozano and Louis wash dishes, and Holly and Farrell are shown sitting on the floor on opposite sides of a door frame talking. An innocent question of Farrell's about whether or not Holly always wanted to be an actress begins a seven minute and forty second sequence, six minutes and twenty seconds of which are monologue. One shot of Holly's face as she recalls finding out that her parents had discovered her brief foray into the porn world lasts for forty four seconds. Again, there is a limited number of types of shots. Medium and close up shots of the two actors, and a two shot that allows the viewer to see both Holly and Farrell at the same time. That kind of time devoted to one character just talking with no music, no camera movement, no verbal cues from another actor, and no "action"' so to speak is almost unheard of in contemporary mainstream American films.

This confession is essentially one of repentance. It is even cleverly staged in some ways like a Catholic confessional. Each of them on either side of the wall, with an open door between

them, they are only inches apart and yet they cannot see each other. Farrell sits in silence, nodding and silently acknowledging as Holly shifts from cheerful and nostalgic to tearful to bitter and ashamed. The open door to which they both have their backs turned functions as the grid or lattice through which confessions are to be heard by an unseen representative of God. Dutcher borrows this set up from Catholicism to further complicate what's already happening. While Farrell does technically hold the Priesthood, he is not a Bishop. Nor, for that matter, is Holly a Mormon. Not only are missionaries not authorized to listen to confessions of sins in any kind of official capacity, having an attractive young woman confess her involvement in pornography to a male Mormon missionary is dangerous ground to tread on to say the least. Faithful Latter-Day Saints are expected to be celibate until they marry and utterly faithful within their marriage. Missionaries in particular are not to even be alone with a member of the opposite sex or have any kind of physical contact with them outside of brief handshakes for the duration of their mission. Holly's unburdening is simultaneously liberating for her and complicating for him. While technically, Farrell shouldn't be having this conversation with Holly, he is actually adhering to important instruction given in the *Book of Mormon*. At a time when Christians are being persecuted by a wicked, hedonistic king, a prophet named Alma agrees to baptize a number of converts in secret. Before they are baptized and take on a covenant to follow Christ, Alma explains some of the obligations to them, saying that if "ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, [you must be] willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God" (Mosiah 18.8-9). Farrel is not being exactly observant of the mission rules, but he is being observant of

the larger, more encompassing commandment to offer comfort to those who are in need. This conundrum echoes something Lozano says earlier in the film when he insists they allow Louis, the ailing, homeless street preacher, to stay in their apartment (another practice that is strictly forbidden by mission rules): "We can keep the rules and leave him lying here in garbage, or we can break the rules and keep the commandments and, I don't know, put him in a real bed." Exact dogmatic obedience and true Christ-like love don't seem to always be completely compatible. In this third film, Dutcher addresses these more complicate spiritual and practical questions through his increasingly complex handling of the fusion/friction element of Mormon spiritual film style.

While these sequences are not single, static, perfectly framed shots that evoke a Transcendent otherworldliness as in *God's Army* and *Brigham City* (though this film does have shots like that), it is in these two monologues that Dutcher's formalism demonstrates evolution. The stillness and contemplation meant to contrast with the freneticism and mainstream content and stylistic components can be expressed in more than one way. The slowing down of a film's narrative can be accomplished in more ways than one. Dutcher showed especially in *Brigham City* that he was capable of arranging a static mise en scene in a way that was evocative of the Transcendent, but rather than simply continuing to rely on that just that same tool, he uses entire sequences to slow the viewer down, to distance him or her from the slicker, more bombastic, more familiar elements of the genre or plot. *States of Grace* is more ambitious and accomplished in its handling of the physical, sensual, temporal elements of form and content and in the extent of its silent, still, contemplative aspects. Both its gun battles and its monologues are bigger and more comprehensive. In the ways in which these elements sometimes fuse and sometimes contrast each other, Dutcher suggests a greater level of complexity in the Latter-Day Saint spiritual worldview and, therefore, in the film style intended to reflect it. Just as a believer might

join the church with somewhat limited knowledge and naïve belief and then progress to a more sophisticated level of faith and understanding, Dutcher's evolving approach over the course of his first three films shows a development of greater technical and aesthetic artistry as well as a more nuanced understanding not just of Mormon doctrine but of real-world Mormon experience. This evolution of style allows viewers to experience a Mormon Transcendent.

Ecumenical Light and Flickering Halos: Light Metaphors in *States of Grace*

Thanks to the additional funding provided by Utah car dealership magnate, Utah Jazz owner, and sometime movie producer Larry Miller, Dutcher had a much larger budget than ever before to make *States of Grace*. From the mere 300,000 or so with which he made *God's Army*, Dutcher now had about 800,000. While certainly not blockbuster money, it's a large sum for a small independent film. Consequently, the overall physical quality of the film is better. As a result of higher quality stock, better cameras, and more advanced developing, the light in *States of Grace* is clearer, cleaner, and more overt. It is much more omnipresent in this film than in the previous two. The fact that the film seems to be suffused with light accompanies the overall ecumenical feel of the film. By widening the scope of the story and its characters, Dutcher seems to suggest that the Mormon characters aren't the only ones preoccupied with spiritual connectivity and that all characters (all people) are entitled to the influence of the Holy Ghost. The significance of the fact that *Brigham City* takes place in a town made almost entirely of Mormons, the people supposedly more entitled to the constant presence of the Holy Ghost, but has large, important sections taking place at night and the fact that *States of Grace* has only a very few LDS characters and yet is bathed in light

In a manner similar to how he combined Mormonism with Catholicism in Holly's confession scene, Dutcher also borrows from more mainstream Christian iconography in two of more interesting light/spirit symbols in *States of Grace*. Twice in the film, Lozano has a kind of halo floating over his head that signifies his spiritual connectivity at that point in the film. The first is during his confession of mediocrity to his companion Farrell. In a highly unrealistic but symbolically significant choice, Dutcher placed these missionaries in a beachside apartment in Santa Monica that is just a stone's throw from the beach and that overlooks the Santa Monica pier amusement park. (Unrealistic because a beachside apartment's rent would be far more expensive than the Church would ever be willing to pay for a missionary residence. Symbolic because missionaries are meant to go into "the World" and pull people out of their strictly hedonistic lives and bring them to a higher way of living. The amusement park rides symbolize the fun, hedonistic pursuits of the world that provide thrills but never really lead anywhere.)

As Lozano sits on his bed, telling his story to his naïve companion, over his shoulder to his right is the illuminated circle of the pier's Ferris wheel. Fuzzed out and distorted because of the shallow focus, the circle appears to be more the idea of a Ferris wheel rather than the actual thing. It blinks on and off, flickers, and even stays steadily on during certain parts of the monologue. Though he didn't have the budget or influence to arrange it purposefully, there are moments when it seems like the activity of the lights mirrors what's being expressed by Lozano. When he is describing being attacked by the rival gang, the wheel blinks on and off, almost as though it is about to go out entirely. When he describes "Elder Tubbs, from Idaho," the missionary who taught and baptized Lozano, the light is steadily on, unwavering. When he admits that he doesn't feel he's amounted to much as a missionary, the lights on the wheel almost shiver to the point of barely seeming there. Following that admission, Lozano lays down

on his bed, leaving the frame, and the camera rack focuses on the distant Ferris wheel, bringing it clearly into picture for the first time. The camera lingers on the shot of the lights shimmering and blinking for five full seconds while we hear Lozano sighing with melancholy off screen.

Mormons believe in angels but not the sort with wings, halos, and all the other stereotypical trappings of gift shop greeting cards and truck stop pendants. In the Latter-Day Saint Bible Dictionary, we are told that modern revelation tells us "there are two classes of heavenly beings who minister for the Lord: those who are spirits and those who have bodies of flesh and bone. Spirits are those beings who either have not yet obtained a body of flesh and bone (unembodied) or who have once had a mortal body and have died and are awaiting the Resurrection (disembodied). Ordinarily the word *angel* means those ministering persons who have a body of flesh and bone, being either resurrected from the dead (reembodied), or else translated, as were Enoch, Elijah, etc." ("Angels"). In other words, angels are simply people who have either not lived on earth yet or have already lived and passed on only to be sent back as a messenger of some kind. To Mormons, angels are human, not some kind of other species with wings, extra eyes, halos, or anything like that. However, Dutcher takes that the image of a halo (almost a cartoonish version of a gold, metal circle above the head) and uses it here to signify Lozano's spiritual connectedness to the Holy Ghost. Lozano lacks both the seasoned certainty of Elder Dalton and the newcomer's fire of Elder Allen from *God's Army*. He is not a lifetime member, deeply entrenched in practice and doctrine like *Brigham City's* Wes Clayton. His grasp on his faith and the link between him and the Divine seem tenuous at best. His "halo" flickers and blinks. It is steady at one moment and seemingly in danger of being extinguished altogether the next. His blinking halo is intended to emphasize the spiritual scarcity he is experiencing at this late date in his mission. (It is revealed during the basketball sequence at the outset of the film

that Lozano is only three weeks from finishing his two-year term of service in the mission field. Normally a time when "faithful" or "successful" missionaries are trying to "finish strong," Lozano just wants to play more basketball and talk about all the non-missionary activities he wants to participate in when he gets home – watching movies, kissing girls, etc.) His mission threatens to end with a whimper rather than a bang and his flickering halo tells us so.

Lozano's second halo appears much later in the film. By this time, Carl the gang member has relinquished his violent ways and been baptized. Louis the street preacher has been staying with the Elders for several days and has become a friend. Holly and the Elders have formed a friendship, and she and Elder Farrell have become particularly close. At this point, Lozano wakes up in the night to find that Farrell isn't in the apartment. As was mentioned earlier, LDS missionaries are expected to be in each other's presence at all times. The church's official *Missionary Handbook* reads, "**Stay Together.** Never be alone. It is extremely important that you stay with your companion at all times. Staying together means staying within sight and hearing of each other. The only times you should be separated from your assigned companion are when you are in an interview with the mission president, on a companion exchange, or in the bathroom. . . Never make exceptions to this standard for activities that seem innocent but take you away from each other, including being in different rooms in the same building or in a home. Situations that seem harmless at the beginning can quickly lead to serious problems. If you live in an apartment with more than one room, always sleep in the same room as your companion, but not in the same bed. Arise and retire at the same time as your companion. Do not stay up late or get up early to be alone" (30-31). It is a very serious breach of mission rules to leave your companion alone. Lozano goes out onto the balcony, notices that the light is on in Holly's apartment, and goes to knock on her door. No one answers. He seems to know what has likely

happened and returns to his apartment to call the mission president and report that his companion has gone AWOL. Sitting at the kitchen table (a familiar sight in Dutcher's films by now), he picks up the (red) phone to make the call. Off to his left, a clock outlined in blue neon lights hangs on the wall. The composition of this shot could not be more deliberate. After he picks up the phone, the camera cuts away to Louis waking up, asking if Lozano thinks Farrell is with Holly. When the camera returns to Lozano, the shot starts low, centered on his hand holding the phone receiver, and then pans up and slightly to the right in order to have both his face and the blue, light-circled clock in the frame.

This time, Lozano's halo, the symbol of his connection to the power and influence of the Holy Ghost, is strong and steady but cold. The blue neon light couldn't be steadier. This is following Lozano's participation in Carl's conversion process and his decision to let Louis stay in the apartment until he recovers from the effects of living on the streets for too long. He may not be keeping every exact rule, but for the first time he is trying to do what Jesus would do, rather than just being blindly and half-heartedly obedient. So his spiritual involvement is strong but it is not the warm, all-encompassing light one would expect. The light is thin and cold. Lozano may be more spiritually connected than he was at the beginning of the film, but the evolution of his relationship with the Divine is not finished. His spiritual state (and everyone else's) is revealed in the final shot of the film, which is something I will discuss in its own section later in this chapter.

What's interesting about Dutcher's use of light as a spiritual metaphor in this film is the same thing that's interesting about each element of Mormon spiritual film style he employs. It is more sophisticated and more ecumenical. This film is less about the culture, doctrine, and practices of just Mormons and is more about the spiritual struggles human beings have. It

decentralizes Mormonism from the narrative and instead focuses on the spiritual state of all characters.

This may seem counter to the thesis of this entire project, but it's not. I do contend that there is no such thing as a spiritual film style and that religious particularity is the key to a myriad of religion-specific spiritual film styles. I don't believe there is a universal style that will evoke the Transcendent for every person and every culture. I do, however, understand that Mormonism believes itself to be a universal religion meant to reach out and encompass the earth. Gordon B. Hinckley, president and prophet of the LDS church from 1994 to 2008, spoke of the mission of the church in 2007 saying, "The Church has become one large family scattered across the earth. There are now more than 13 million of us in 176 nations and territories. A marvelous and wonderful thing is coming to pass. The Lord is fulfilling His promise that His gospel shall be as the stone cut out of the mountain without hands which would roll forth and fill the whole earth, as Daniel saw in vision. A great miracle is taking place right before our eyes" ("The Stone Cut Out of the Mountain"). So while Mormonism (and a Mormon spiritual film style) will retain its primary themes and idiosyncrasies, it is meant to be like the light in *States of Grace*, touching every person regardless of their place in life, their background, their beliefs, etc. In the Latter-Day Saint view, Mormonism is simply pure, correct Christianity, and it will eventually flood the whole earth. So it stands to reason that both the style and content of an LDS film style must also reach out and address more lifestyles, backgrounds, belief systems, and worldviews than simply those of the already converted. So what one observer might think is Dutcher moving away from strict Mormonism stylistically and thematically in *States of Grace* is actually his work addressing more fully some of the deeper, longer term beliefs and goals of the church itself. This

universality also comes into play when looking at the film's use of LDS ordinances.

Violence/Ordinance/Salvation in *States of Grace*

There are three significant Priesthood ordinances in *States of Grace*: a pair of baptisms (one official, one unofficial) and a confirmation. Each shows how Dutcher's use of this particular element of Mormon spiritual film style evolves in this picture. The pair of baptisms both involve Carl, the repentant gang banger from the drive-by shooting early in the picture. The first is seemingly a highly traditional depiction of a standard LDS baptism, the sort of thing that might even appear in one of the Church's institutional training or proselyting movies. However, the placement of the ordinance and some of what happens around it within the film show that it is not as straightforward as it appears.

Frightened by his brush with death and fascinated by the LDS missionaries who worked to save him when members of his own posse left him to bleed out, he listens to the missionary lessons required for baptism, goes through a baptismal interview (a brief meeting between a potential convert and a priesthood holder, usually a missionary leader – in this case, Elder Banks, the lone African American Elder from *God's Army*), and then is seen wading into the waters of the Pacific Ocean with Elder Lozano, both dressed all in white. The sixty second scene is nearly wordless, but it is glossy, sun-drenched, and filled with rising orchestral music that fits with a stereotypically "uplifting" scene of religious conversion. The scene is obviously meant to echo *God's Army*. It takes place at the same rocky outcropping as Benny's baptism and features the same slow, right to left pan across the faces of the onlookers on the beach. The scene almost seems to say, "Remember this?" to followers of Dutcher's work.

Carl is submerged in the churning water and comes back up, smiling and triumphant. In *God's Army*, this ordinance was the climax, the physical symbol of Allen's own conversion and

his power to inspire (or at least assist in) the conversion of others. In *States of Grace*, glossy and lovely as it is, it happens just past the midpoint of the film and seems to be so Edenic that, undoubtedly, bad things are on the horizon for these characters. Carl's younger brother, Todd, glowers at Carl from the beach, having questioned Carl's manhood just the night before: "What is wrong with you? They killed Abe and all you want to do is sit around and read the Bible. . . I don't care what the Bible says. What I want is for you to be a man!" It's clear that the baptism isn't an act of reconciliation, peace, or resolution for Todd.

Similarly, Elder Farrell and Holly, also on the beach, share an uncomfortably long, meaningful look as everyone else watches Carl and Lozano come in from the water. For a missionary who is supposed to keep his eyes on the "strait and narrow path," it's clear Farrell is giving serious though to veering out of line with his lovely neighbor. The cleansing, covenant-cementing effect of baptism appears to be having no osmosis-like effect on Farrell. This baptism, while seemingly efficacious for Carl, isn't achieving what it has in the past in Dutcher's missionary narrative nor is it edifying at least a few very key attendees. This represents another step in Dutcher's use of ordinances as a complicating factor rather than just as a salvific one. *Brigham City's* serial killer-baptizer, Terry, did demonstrate that a saving ordinance doesn't always save and is sometimes fraught with uncertainty. But it was almost an afterthought rather than a key plot point. Here, this baptism, while holy and efficacious in the eyes of Latter-Day Saints, is also a narrative catalyst for Todd's death and Carl's reentrance into the world of gang violence as well as a nail in Farrell's coffin of illicit desire and eventual disobedience.

The film's longest and most ambitious sequence inextricably combines both a Priesthood ordinance and the movie's starkest act of violence. As I have been saying all along, *States of Grace* is the film in which Dutcher made definite stylistic, narrative, and technical leaps. In that

development, he not only added sophistication to his handling of the elements of LDS spiritual film style, but he also combined them in ways he hadn't previously attempted. In *God's Army*, for example, it was easy to point out a Hollywood-style sequence and contrast it with the still iconic moment of Allen in the kitchen. It was simple to discuss Kinegar's departure into the darkness and Dalton's disappearance into the light separately from Benny's tale of assault. These separations were easy to make because they are very separate elements of the film. Each is its own set piece, its own collection of aesthetic and cinematic choices. *States of Grace*, however, combines all the elements of LDS spiritual film style in a way not attempted before. No sequence shows this more than the confirmation/execution sequence that follows shortly after the Edenic baptism scene.

It should be noted that, as with the red herring sequence in *Brigham City*, Dutcher isn't shy about cribbing storytelling techniques from other well-known filmmakers. The sequence I'm about to explicate has some structural and at least superficial thematic similarities to the climactic christening sequence from *The Godfather* (Coppola 1972). Both feature a holy ceremony being performed while scenes of violence and death are intercut. The language of the ceremony is used in voiceover throughout and the ironic contrast between the holy and the profane is starkly evident. While these similarities are present, Dutcher uses his sequence to a different end than Coppola. Rather than using the back-and-forth contrast to emphasize a cold, negative fatalism, *States of Grace* uses the sequence to establish tragedy in order to allow for salvation. Mormonism is ultimately a hopeful religion and in this, the most developed film made in the LDS spiritual film style, even horrific violence (or perhaps especially horrific violence) is there as a stepping stone toward the hope of being saved from it in one way or another.

The sequence begins simply enough with Carl and his grandmother leaving the house, dressed for church, and Carl wondering where Todd is. It's clear Carl is attempting to be something new here. Instead of the gangster chic do-rag, wife beater, flannel, and baggy jeans we've seen him in up to this point, he is in slacks and a sweater, looking for all the world like a nice boy who goes to church. He wants his younger brother to attend his confirmation and is clearly disappointed that he is nowhere to be found. The scene cuts to Todd in a bright red hoodie, slumped against a seat in a subway car, staring off in the distance. The subway window is dark and clearly evokes Todd's mood and spiritual state of being. He then is seen rising up on an escalator out of a subway entrance that is tiled in blood-red. Dutcher's affection for color symbolism is more apparent here than in *Brigham City* even.

From this moment, the sequence shifts into commercial, mainstream Hollywood mode. Todd pulls up his hood and begins stalking the streets as the Latin-influence rap song "Ima Showem" by Grits plays. A bouncing handheld camera accompanies the young man through a Hispanic neighborhood. Quick-cut shots of street signs with names like Alvarado St. and graffiti murals of the singer Selena and taco vending trucks along with the poppy, percussive music clearly brand the setting as a barrio. Todd walks through it, suspicious and hooded. The camera acts as Todd's eyes, panning from side to side, assessing pedestrians standing on the street lighting a cigarette, talking on a payphone, and digging through discount bins outside a store. A man on the street seems to recognize Todd when he walks by, and the man darts off, clearly intending to alert someone. The camera work is jittery and alive, and this section of the larger sequence feels similar in tone and pace to a music video. It's a short section, only about forty five seconds or so, but it is a moment of mainstream Hollywood style nestled within something more complex.

The scene then cuts to Carl and his grandma in an LDS chapel. The room is dim and a bank of three windows behind the pulpit is flooded with golden light. The Bishop of the ward invites Carl to the stand so he can be confirmed a member of the church. Carl takes his place on the rostrum, and he is surrounded by a group of missionaries who place their hands on his head. Lozano actually performs the ordinance, calling Carl by name and saying, "In the name of Jesus Christ by the authority of the holy Melchezidek Priesthood we hold, we place our hands upon your head and we confirm you a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and we say to you, receive the Holy Ghost." The camera work here is slow, subtle, and steady. A downward pan from Lozano's face finds Carl, eyes closed, surrounded by men in dark suits. The dark background highlights the clean, white side light illuminating his face. As the camera cuts back to Lozano, there is a warm, silken quality to the light in the room A non-diegetic non-verbal vocal comes up on the soundtrack under Lozano's blessing and it continues throughout the entire sequence. A vocalist hums along with a minimalist synthesized accompaniment and sounds, by turns, both hopeful and mournful. The music, camera work, and lighting all indicate something holy is taking place here.

However, intercut with Lozano confirming and blessing Carl are scenes of Todd back in the barrio. We see the same blue car and same Hispanic gang members from the drive-by shooting earlier in the film. This is who the man on the street ran to alert. They spy Todd in his bright red hoodie (an image that evokes Little Red Riding Hood as much as it does sacrificial blood) and we hear, "That's him. I know it." We see the lead gang member's face in profile looking hawkish and predatory and then the scene cuts back to Carl's beatific face, still being blessed. Lozano tells him that as he listens to the promptings of the Holy Ghost that he will "be guided and protect." Before the line of dialogue is even finished, we see Todd from behind,

walking down the street, being followed with the camera standing in as the p.o.v of his would-be assailants. Lozano's words serve as an ironic counterpoint to Todd's vulnerable, lost position in enemy territory.

Lozano's blessing reemphasizes the centrality of Priesthood ordinances. Even as he is performing one, he points out, "You have chosen to enter the waters of baptism. There you chose to take upon you the name of Jesus Christ. You made a covenant with him to keep all of his commandments. Remember this covenant that you have made with him." Ordinances are the welding links between mortal life and the God's power. Adhering to the conditions of the covenants is what entitles a person to blessings, power, and salvation. Latter-Day Saint scriptures tell us, "There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated . . . when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated" (DC 130.20-21). Ordinances are the process of making a two-way promise with God. Holding up our end, so to speak, is the key to receiving the blessings promised as God's end of the deal. So as Carl peacefully sits under the hands of all these men, he is completing the final portion of entering into the baptismal covenant with God, an agreement that promises the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, a remission of sins, and being spiritually born again. The friction of this sequence, of course, comes from the fact that, just as Carl is being made into a "new creature," Todd's life is in tremendous danger (Mosiah 27:26).

Back on the street, Todd looks over his shoulder, sees his pursuers and takes off down a series of dirty back alleys. The camera stalks him from the p.o.v. of the men in the car. Inevitably, he runs down a blind alley and finds himself trapped. The camera shoots him through the boarded up windows and doors that trap him. Todd is thirteen years old, and his voice cracks a little as he screams for help while five adult gang members close in on him. The camera work

here is still handheld and jittery. This portion is still connected to Carl, however, through the vocal on the soundtrack. It adds a haunting, melancholy feel to this panicky moment. Meanwhile, Carl is being reminded that he has been given "the gift of the Holy Spirit which will help you in selecting right from wrong and knowing truth from error." Todd, trapped in blind alley, pounding futilely against locked doors, no longer has choice.

The two brothers' separate paths are emphasized in the final moments of the sequence. Visual echoes and mirrors heighten the almost allegorical feeling of the scenes. Both men are surrounded – Carl by an almost womb-like wall of dark suits, illuminated with white light, and Todd in flatly-lit dirty alley by men intending to kill him. The idea of a "saving" ordinance becomes very literal here. Had Todd accompanied his brother to church, he certainly wouldn't be cornered in an alley about to die.

The confirmation blessing begins to come to an end. Of course, Dutcher manipulates time and draws it out, doling out portions of Lozano's words in between scenes of Todd's confrontation. Todd pulls a gun and points it at his attackers, but it jams when he tried to fire. His inexperience and naïveté with the world of violence makes him unprepared to navigate these particular waters. The gang members close in on him, one of them taking him in a choke hold while the others circle around him. In the film's most unsettling depiction of violence, the lead gang member takes out a long knife with a mean-looking serrated blade and stabs Todd twice in the stomach with it. It is brief but visceral. The camera is close-up on the gang member's hand unfolding the blade and then thrusting up into Todd's stomach. A close-up on Todd reveals pain, fear, hate, and confusion. The camera returns briefly to Lozano, eyes closed, finishing Carl's blessing, but the cuts directly back to the gang member's angry, twisted face as he pulls the knife out. There is a split second shot of Todd grimacing, a split second flash of the serrated blade

covered in blood being pushed back into Todd, and a brief shot of one of the gang members turning his head away from what is happening. Lozano finishes the blessing in the traditional Mormon way, saying, "In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen" and shots of Farrell and Carl's grandmother smiling and echoing "amen" are quickly followed by a return to the alley where Todd is released from the chokehold he was in and he collapses to the ground.

Obviously, contrast is very important to this sequence – violence versus peace, light versus the absence of light, the beginning of a new spiritual life versus the end of a mortal life. However, the way Dutcher films the final moments of the sequence suggests that, rather than opposite polarities, Todd and Carl's experiences, while different, are part of the same continuum. Again, the essence of Mormonism is fusion between the spiritual and the physical. Life and death, pleasure and pain, sin and forgiveness are all part of the Latter-Day Saint way of viewing the purpose of life. And so the two paths of the brothers are not meant to serve as a simple parable of the repentant Carl and the rebellious Todd (although it can certainly be read that way.) Rather, this sequence is meant to emphasize the Mormon concept of necessary opposition and how that opposition is part of an eternal design. Suffering, sadness, and loss are not some unfortunately, unplanned for by-product of mortal existence. They are important refining elements that allow people to eventually become a more perfected being.

Dutcher illustrates the linked relationship between suffering and salvation through camera work in the final moments of the confirmation sequence. As Todd falls to the ground, the camera on a crane rises up over him and the gang members into an extreme high angle. The camera rotates clockwise while the gang members circle Todd counterclockwise as he lies on the ground in his red hoodie, in a semi-fetal position. In a hard cut back to the LDS chapel, we see the same exact high angle shot (motionless this time, no rotating) above Carl and the circle of

Elders with their hands on his head looking very much like the spokes on a wheel. The scene cuts back to Todd, laying on alley floor, shuddering, as the camera almost imperceptibly moves in for a closer look. His eyes bulge and then close. Again, a hard cut back to the chapel reveals a close-up of Carl's face as he opens his eyes following the end of the confirmation prayer. One brother's physical life ends as the other's spiritual life begins.

The camera returns to its high perch above Carl and the missionaries, and he moves from one to the other shaking their hands. The film speed is slowed down to three quarter time, giving everyone's motion a dreamy, contemplative quality. The same slow motion is used when the scene cuts back to the alley where we see the same extreme high angle shot and the gang members still circling Todd in a way that echoes and mirrors the men circling Carl. The gang members walk out of the shot and the camera continues to rotate clockwise until Todd's body is seen right side up and completely centered in the screen. The shot lingers there for just a moment, his body perfectly framed, icon-like, against the scuffed, dirty concrete of the alley floor. In its purposeful composition and symbolic use of color, in its placement within the sequence, in its narrative and thematic significance, it is a truly beautiful and tremendously sad image. The camera cuts to a low, medium wide shot of the gangsters walking away from Todd's body, pocketing the jammed gun that sealed his fate. Todd's body, much like the body of the sports car girl in *Brigham City*, is off-center in this shot, laying on the ground, dehumanized, looking like it might just be one more collection of trash caught in a dead-end alley.

The last moments of the sequence are images of Carl at the church, still in three quarter motion, shaking hands and embracing Lozano. Warm, golden light continues to illuminate everything. The final shot is a medium wide angle shot of Carl standing on the rostrum in front of the congregation, backlit by the bank of windows, lined in gold light, hands folded reverently

in front of him, seemingly presenting himself as a new creature before them. The scene then cuts to Carl and his grandmother in the car, driving home from church, standard film speed, diegetic sound only, natural lighting.

The confirmation sequence represents the stylistic high point in Dutcher's Mormon quartet. In its six minutes and ten seconds, the sequence manages to employ every major stylistic and content component of LDS spiritual film style in a way that forwards the narrative of the film and heightens the likelihood of an evocation or encounter with a Mormon transcendent. An act of violence and an act of Priesthood ordinance are inextricably linked both narratively and thematically. Light, its presence and its absence, is used to signify characters' connectivity to the Holy Ghost. Mainstream Hollywood film elements like whip fast editing, pop music montages, and chases ending in dead end alleys combine with more traditional spiritual film style elements such as slow, deliberate editing and camera work along with a painterly composition of mise en scene meant to evoke an invisible, spiritual world just beyond this one. All of these elements together form the attempt at fusion that best represents a Latter-Day Saint worldview. Since one of the major tenets of that worldview is that God is in all things, it stands to reason that God can (and should) be encountered in these moments.

The other ordinance, Carl's second baptism, is also twined with violence. As is always the case with violence in films made in the Mormon spiritual film style, it carves out a salvific space in which the characters involved have the opportunity to be redeemed or rescued from it or its effects. In the case of *States of Grace*, Carl comes home from church only to find police officers waiting to inform him and his grandma that Todd's body has been found stabbed to death in a Hispanic neighborhood. Angry and awash with grief, Carl transforms back into his old self. The scene cuts from him, still in his nice-boy sweater and slacks, looking at Todd's body in

a hospital emergency room to him in his backyard, back in his do-rag and hoodie, digging up the weapons he had buried in the backyard.

As a side note, the burial of the weapons is culturally significant to Latter-Day Saints. During his baptismal interview with Elder Banks, Carl indicates he had done terrible things in his life as a gang member. The implication is that he has killed people, though it's never explicitly stated. Banks tells Carl the story of a tribe in the *Book of Mormon* known as the Anti Nephi Lehies (whether the *Book of Mormon* actually is the word of God or is a complete work of fiction doesn't change the fact that some of the names in it border on the ludicrous). This tribe, once bloodthirsty and violent, becomes converted to Christianity and wants to repent of their sins. Banks says, "When they got [the gospel], when they finally got the law, then they knew how wrong their lives had been and they wanted to repent. And to show how serious they were, they took all their weapons and they buried them deep in the earth. And they made a vow that they would never, never under any circumstance, take another human life. And then they joined the people of God." When Carl asks what ended up happening to the people, Banks says, "Somewhere out there, deep in the earth, those weapons are still buried. They all kept their promise, every single one of them, even though it cost some of them their lives." Banks encourages Carl to "be a new man" and the interview ends. Carl is later shown, the night before his baptism, burying two handguns and a knife in his backyard, symbolically burying his old life, his old self prior to being buried in the waters of baptism. So, when he is shown angrily stabbing at his backyard garden with a shovel and unearthing the bundle of destruction he left there, it's clear he is not only willing but eager to renounce the covenants he made with God and to take violent revenge.

He and his friends from his old life troll the streets of the Hispanic neighborhood all night, looking for the gang member Carl knows is responsible for Todd's death. Eventually, the next day, they catch sight of the man who stabbed Todd pushing a broken down motorcycle along the road. In their car, they chase him down into a dusty city park and knock him down. The scene is all quick cuts, the sound of a revving engine, and shouting. The man crashes into the windshield of the car and is flipped over the roof. As he writhes in pain in the dirt, Carl and his friends exit the car and begin kicking him in the back, stomach, and obviously broken leg as the man screams out in pain. "Help me!" the man shouts. "I'll help you out of your misery," Carl's friend replies. Like several other elements of *States of Grace*, this sequence echoes back to *God's Army*. Both films involve several gang members beating up a lone victim and do serious damage to his legs. But were the first film only describes the violence, the second one depicts it. Dutcher ups the ante here, going from describing brutal violence in the quartet's first film to showing more graphically its aftermath in the second film, to depicting the actual acts of violence themselves in the third film. Seeing Benny wanly describe a man standing on his throat and breaking his crutches, while effective in its context, lacks the visceral brutality of seeing someone kick a broken leg and hearing the victim scream because of it. The stakes are higher in this film. The violence is more intense and the need for salvation is too.

Pinning him down, Carl points his newly unearthed pistol between the man's eyes. Almost conjuring up the violence that's been done to him, Carl says, "You killed my little brother, homie. His name was Todd. He was thirteen years old and you killed him with a knife! You killed my brother, you killed my best friend, and you shot me! You shot me!" Amid the whimpering and screaming, the man begins to pray in Spanish. Carl becomes more uncertain. The introduction of religious faith seems to unnerve him and he falters. His two friends continue

to shout, "Just do it! Kill him!" but suddenly, Carl finds himself unable to go through with it. He stands up and makes it clear he has no intention of killing the man. But as he walks away, one of his friends pulls out a revolver and shoots the man through the head. In an orbital shot, the camera shows the horror on Carl's face as the world wheels around him, seemingly unhinged. The violence he had just tried to reject overtakes the situation anyway, and while he did not pull the trigger, until mere seconds before, he was the ring leader and the instigator. Rather than a sense of justice being served and satisfaction being had, there is only the feeling of loss and defeat. Carl's friends speed off in the car, but he stays behind for a few moments and kneels at the feet of the body, obviously regretful. As police sirens sound in the distance, he grabs his gun and walks to the nearest subway entrance. Fittingly, it is the same blood-red entrance that Todd emerged from when he arrived in the neighborhood on his mission of revenge. We see Carl heavily walking down the stairs, sinking down out of sight into what could easily be interpreted as the gates of Hell. He then is seen on the subway in a mirror image shot of Todd from earlier in the film, the window dark, his soul darker.

When he emerges from the underground tunnel of his soul, Carl turns up at the beach near the rocky outcropping where he was baptized. It's dusk and he is just a silhouette against the pink and orange sky over the water. It's here that he reaches a spiritual turning point somewhat similar to Elder Allen's in *God's Army*. Following violence and after his "dark night of the soul," Carl comes of age spiritually and fully rejects his prior life. In a more effective and permanent burying of his weapons of violence, he dismantles his gun, throws it piece by piece into the ocean, and bellows at the horizon, "No!" as though he is repudiating the track his life might have taken earlier that day had he chosen to pull the trigger. Carl wanders into the water, eventually immersing himself, experiencing a second, perhaps more complete baptism than the official one

from a few days prior. Again, like Elder Allen, it is a conversion that is brought about specifically due to the pressure created by intense, violent confrontation. Again, Dutcher repeats his thematic concern – the cause and effect relationship between violence and redemption. Rather than an incidental connection between the two, he suggests that violence is a catalyzing force that generates salvation or at least opportunities for it.

This is, of course, not technically an ordinance. It is not official or sanctioned by the Church or conducted by the authority of the Priesthood. However, it is in keeping with the development of Dutcher's LDS spiritual film style. Just as the light falls on everyone in this film, symbolizing every person's connection to the divine and deemphasizing strict membership in the Mormon church as a necessary component of spiritual progress, Carl's unofficial baptism, his self-administered ordinance, demonstrates the Latter-Day Saint belief that salvation is not just the blind participation in a set of ceremonies. Just as Jesus tells Nicodemus in the Bible that man must "be born of water and of the spirit [or] he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (John 3.5), the *Book of Mormon* prophet Alma explains that when people are truly converted, "Behold, he changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God. Behold, they were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless, their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word" (Alma 5.7). It is not enough in the Mormon view to simply be baptized, even if it is by the authority of God. Conversion, a spiritual birth, a change to one's actual nature must take place. Carl's second baptism may not be "official" in the sense of appearing on church records, but it symbolizes his personal investment in being made new. Some more orthodox Mormons may bristle at the idea of any kind of "unofficial" baptism, but the outward sign of a spiritual internalization of an ordinance is completely within Mormon doctrine and culture.

One other sequence involving the violence/salvation dynamic features the fate of Farrell. The next morning after his mysterious late-nigh disappearance (Lozano did not end up calling the mission president to report him), Farrell breaks down in tears over breakfast out of guilt. He had snuck next door, had sex with Holly, and tried to ease back into the apartment without being detected but his conscience wouldn't let him get away with it. He confesses to the mission president and, as is standard for a mission rule violation of that magnitude, is scheduled to be sent home early. The cultural stigma associated with leaving mission service early due to transgression is hard to put into words. Missionaries pay their own way, put everything in their lives on hold for two years, move to some geographically distant place, live 24/7 with total strangers, and put their whole selves on the line talking to strangers about their deepest, most intimate spiritual experiences. It is a massive commitment of time, money, and personal capital. At the same time, that sacrifice is celebrated, mythologized, and romanticized. Departing missionaries are treated like heroes going off to war, and honorably returned missionaries are treated in their congregations like celebrities. It is such a major hallmark of church service, it is also often thought of as a kind of indicator for the rest of your life. Hard-working, successful missionaries are usually thought to be the sort of person who becomes a spiritual, professional, personal success in the rest of their lives. So to leave a mission dishonorably because of a major violation of the rules is (culturally-speaking) a devastating mark of shame.

When Farrell is scheduled to be sent home, the shame proves to be too much. In a quiet moment amid packing his things (including a plaque that reads "Return With Honor") he slips into the bathroom and cuts his wrists open. Blood covers the sink, toilet, and bathtub. The gashed open wound on one of his wrists is shown in a brief, gory moment. Wrapping his wounds in neckties, the other missionaries carry him out of the apartment, arms spread wide in a crucifix

shape, and load him into the van to take him to the hospital. In the van, everyone is covered in blood, their hands, their white shirts and ties. Farrell's mess covers everyone who touches him.

This somewhat melodramatic turn of events leads to his mother flying to California to bring him home following his brief stay the hospital. (His father wouldn't come out of shame and disappointment over his disobedient son.) As he and his mother are about to depart from the Elders' beachside apartment for the last time, many of the film's characters have gathered to say goodbye. Louis the preacher, the sister missionaries from the basketball match the beginning of the film, President Beecroft (saying another sad, premature goodbye to an Elder), and several other missionaries. They embrace near the car and just as Farrell is about to go, he hears the sound of the Christmas hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" being played. Over the course of the film, we have seen a local church erecting a small stable along the beach sidewalk as part of a live Nativity for Christmas. Almost as though he has been mesmerized, Farrell walks over to it, followed by all of his well-wishers.

It is at this point that the film that it becomes a kind of fantasia. It leaves the realm of realism in which it has been pretty firmly rooted until now and becomes an overt allegory. In the stable are all the familiar figures of a Nativity scene: three wise men in elaborate robes, a shepherd boy scratching his itchy headcovering, a bearded man as Joseph, a dark-haired woman in blue as Mary, and an actual infant in a manger. The camera pans from left to right, following Farrell's gaze as he studies each one, finally coming to rest on the baby. As he looks at the stand-in Christ-child, Holly suddenly appears at his side and takes his arm. He takes her hand, the camera angle highlighting his bandaged wrist. The shot cuts back and forth between the alert, bright-eyed baby in the manger and the wounded missionary and the woman who is both the symbol of his downfall and of the hope for love and connection that goes beyond simple church

membership. One by one, Farrell is joined by his mother, Lozano, Louis, the sister missionaries, Carl, and President Beecroft. The sequence is wordless, the strains of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" accompanying all the action.

The woman playing Mary scoops up her baby, bundled in a white blanket, and hands the child to one of the spectators for her to hold. She hands the baby to Louis, who hands him to Carl, and so on, each one looking admiringly at the tiny baby. This is the aspect that departs from reality the most. I can't fathom a woman handing her infant child over to a group of strangers who just wandered up on a beachside walking path. As a parent myself, I roll my eyes a little at this turn, but then I realize that the point of this sequence is not realism. This is the culmination of the Farrell's development through the narrative and of the film's message. It is a moment intended, perhaps to evoke the sobs and goosebumps that Schrader decries in his book, but the fact that a moment like this coexists with the artistry of the confirmation sequence and the stillness of the confession sequences demonstrates the hybrid nature of Mormon spiritual film style.

The baby is handed from person to person, each one only taking a moment, until the child ends up with Farrell. A reverse shot shows the baby looking up at him, bright eyed and smiling, and Farrell begins to cry. The symbolism of a Christ baby looking at Farrell with love and acceptance is heavy. Farrell's words to Holly at the end of her confession that she echoed back to him as he recovered in the hospital seem to hang in the air: "Jesus loves you. Just as much now as when you were a baby." The Christmas hymn imperceptibly fades out and the music transitions into the film's score, a swelling orchestral piece that heightens the emotionalism of the scene. Farrell's emotions intensify and he asks if he can be the one to place the baby back in the manger. He kneels to do so, but instead of putting the baby down, he hugs the child and

continues to cry. Mary kneels down next to him, still wordless, still oddly unperturbed by this sobbing crazy person holding her infant. When she kneels, the impassive wise men behind her also kneel. Then Joseph kneels, then Louis, Carl, and so on. As the music rises, individual shots capture each person kneeling down until every person is arranged in a position of worship. The camera returns to the still-sobbing Farrell and the baby, still smiling, still loving Farrell despite his bandaged wrists and everything that precipitated them.

The final shot of the film proper is a wide angle crane shot taken from behind the small crowd kneeling in the sand. The light in this scene up to this point has been natural, mid-day light, but now, thanks to movie making magic, it is suddenly sunset and a blazing, golden sun sinks just behind the Santa Monica pier amusement park in the top right hand corner of the screen. The stable is bottom left of center of the screen. The symbolic golden light streams across the picture, signifying the holiness of what is being represented onscreen. The camera rises slowly over the scene, the actors in a motionless tableau vivant of worship that conjures the scripture from the *Book of Mormon*: "Yea, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess before him. Yea, even at the last day, when all men shall stand to be judged of him, then shall they confess that he is God; then shall they confess, who live without God in the world, that the judgment of an everlasting punishment is just upon them; and they shall quake, and tremble, and shrink beneath the glance of his all-searching eye" (Mosiah 27.31).

The sequence suggests that Farrell is not beyond hope of salvation, despite what his culture or his shamefaced parents may tell him. It took an act of grotesque physical violence to bring him to this point, but in the end, the film makes clear he can be rescued and redeemed from his shortcomings. For that matter, the larger message of the film and the obvious moral of the tableau is that no one is beyond hope, Mormon or otherwise. While this sequence lacks the

elaborate artistry and tonal complexity of the confirmation sequence, it still employs the stylistic hybridity and centrality of violence as a necessary prerequisite to salvation that are primary elements of LDS spiritual film style. The film overall is the most developed and most expertly executed example of this style of Dutcher's oeuvre and generally of any other LDS filmmaker's work either. It was artistically if not commercially a zenith for Mormon filmmaking and for Dutcher's exploration of his religion as a devout Latter-Day Saint.

Chapter Seven

*Falling***: Fallen from Grace**

The final entry in this quartet of films I'm examining is 2008's *Falling*. The film is the exception that largely proves the rule of Mormon spiritual film style. Through the initial three films, Dutcher explored and developed the spirit/body –physical/spiritual fusion of contemporary Hollywood style and Schraderian stillness and silence, the use of light as a specific metaphor for the presence of the Holy Ghost as Mormons understand it, the presence and efficacy of Priesthood ordinances in the lives of Latter-Day Saints, and the necessity of violence as a catalyst for spiritual and/or physical salvation. Each of these elements works to both depict the world from an LDS point of view and to evoke an encounter with a Mormon divine. Each of these components reached a high point in *States of Grace* as Dutcher used his narrative and his technical tools to reach beyond just the narrow cultural world of Mormonism to show how the church's doctrine and message is intended to flood the world, not just continue to recirculate among the already converted. The film actually became more Mormon, more reflective of LDS doctrine by telling a story that was more ecumenical.

Falling is dramatically different than anything Dutcher had attempted before and needless to say, is radically different than anything in the entire body of Mormon cinema in general. *Falling* still tells a story that is tangentially related to Mormonism, but Dutcher seemingly removes every aspect of LDS spiritual film style from the movie. The content and the style of the film are so different than what he had done before, one might be tempted to suggest that this is not a Mormon film at all. Not only are the elements of the style not present, the film very explicitly sends the message that there is no Mormon divine to encounter on film or anywhere else. It seems to blatantly reject the themes and aesthetics Dutcher carefully

constructed over the previous three films. However, despite all of the obvious absences – the lack of stillness to combine/contrast with the films almost constant freneticism, the lack of light signifying spiritual connection, the non-existence of any Priesthood ordinance – to say that the film is not somehow part of Mormon film style is to miss the point. In fact, it is the overt absence of these elements that ties this film so intimately to Dutcher's previous work. It isn't as though his fourth film was a documentary about the production of ball bearings during World War II. It's not as though his next work after *States of Grace* was entirely separate from his previous work. Instead, *Falling* has a Mormon-shaped hole in it, if you will. The film is not at all independent of what has gone before, but rather, it relies on what it is not in order to shape what it is. *Falling* is like a photo negative of the first three films or the negative space surrounding the contours of the previous movies. In this sense, it's actually reminiscent of an idea presented in a work from another LDS raconteur, Orson Scott Card. In his short story, "Unaccompanied Sonata," readers find a future in which everyone is assigned a role in life according to their talents. A young man portentiously named Christian is found to be a musical prodigy so the government authorities remove him from his home and place him in utter seclusion so that he will never hear regular common music that might taint his genius. As a young adult, Christian is given a recording of Bach's music by a rebellious interloper who wants to "free" him from his government-imposed solitude. Christian listens to the music and immediately masters the concept of a fugue. In order to not be detected by the authorities, Christian tries to hide his exposure to outside music. Soon though, his overseer shows up and confronts him.

"Christian Haroldsen," where is the recorder?" the Watcher asked.
"Recorder?" Christian asked, then knew it was hopeless. So he took the machine and gave it to the Watcher.
"Oh, Christian," said the Watcher, and his voice was mild and sorrowful. "Why didn't you turn it in without listening to it?"
"I meant to," Christian said. "But how did you know?"

"Because suddenly there are no fugues in your work. Suddenly your songs have lost the only Bach-like thing about them. And you've stopped experimenting with new sounds. What were you trying to avoid?"

"This," Christian said, and he sat down and on his first try duplicated the sound of the harpsichord.

"Yet you've never tried to do that until now, have you?"

"I thought you'd notice."

"Fugues and harpsichord, the two things you noticed first-and the only things you didn't absorb into your music. All your other songs for these last weeks have been tinted and colored and influenced by Bach. Except that there was no fugue, and there was no harpsichord" (280).

Christian's post-Bach music is a dead giveaway of where he was before and where he is now. *Fallen* functions in the same way for Richard Dutcher and LDS spiritual film style. It is what he consciously removes that reveals and highlights what was there before. While it may not seem "Mormon" per se in its tone, content, style, or aesthetics, it is shaped so completely by its absences, the film is inherently LDS and is very much an offshoot of the Latter-Day Saint spiritual film style. Through the stylistic and content elements that Dutcher withdraws from the movie, viewers can more clearly see how prominent they were in the previous three films. *Falling* serves as a fascinating (though difficult to watch) coda to the quartet and stylistically reflects Dutcher's doctrinal rejection of Mormonism.

The film is extraordinarily dark in its tone and content, especially when compared to Dutcher's first three theatrically-released movies. As I mentioned in chapter two, Dutcher lost his faith in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints early in the production of *States of Grace* following a long period of prayer and contemplation. *Falling* was filmed immediately after production on *States of Grace* wrapped and debuted in 2008, two years after *States of Grace* was released. Given the timing, a casual observer might think that *Falling* was a reaction to losing his faith. In reality, he wrote the script for the film before he wrote *God's Army* and had been saving it for the right moment to make. With additional funds from producer Larry Miller to work on *States of Grace*, Dutcher was able to free up other funds to cast *Falling* at the same

time as *SoG* and go immediately to work on it after work on the first film finished. (Dutcher was careful to separate production money for the two films because he knew the prominent and faithful Larry Miller wouldn't want his financing to be associated with *Falling*.) So while the script was written long before his departure from the church, the film was actually made while he was deep in the throes of having lost a belief system that gave purpose to his existence and meaning to everything in the universe. I argue that, though the content of the movie was already established in the script, the style in which Dutcher filmed *Falling* actually is a physical representation of his loss of faith. Chances are, the film wouldn't exist in its present state at all had Dutcher not felt his faith abruptly disengage from him. It was his previous belief in Mormonism that gave birth to this seeming negation of Mormon style. Belief and loss of belief are intrinsically linked together in this film.

The film tells the story of a Los Angeles-based videographer, Eric Boyle, who stumbles upon and films a gangland killing. The gang members then systematically hunt Boyle down, brutally murdering people as they get closer and closer to Boyle. The videographer character, played by Dutcher, is an inactive Latter-Day Saint who is shown longing for the earlier part of his life when he was an active, believing Mormon. (Cleverly, Dutcher uses footage of himself from *God's Army* as flashback material for his current character.) Brutal and bleak, the film embraces all the darkness the other three films acknowledge (the possibility of catastrophic violence, betrayal by those you love most, the damage our personal failings can cause) but offers none of the redemption. While describing the absence of an element is not as interesting as explicating its presence, there are a few moments and sequences in the film that most effectively encapsulate the stylistic shift that accompanied Dutcher's shift in faith that I'd like to examine here.

Not Holywood, Barely Hollywood: Stylistic Absences in *Falling*

Mormon spiritual film style is marked first by a combination of slick, flashy, audience pleasing elements (rousing non-diegetic music, rapid-fire editing, expressive performances from attractive actors, and dramatic narratives) with components more associated with Paul Schrader's concept of a universal spiritual film style (non-diegetic silence, impassive performances by amateur actors, motionless or very still camera work, deliberate and workmanlike editing, and painterly mise en scene.) Because Latter-Day Saints believe in a world that is intentionally and beneficially both physical and spiritual and that we are beings who are supposed to be both spiritual and carnal, it stands to reason that a Mormon film style would reflect an embrace of kineticism and stillness, the sacred and the profane, the exciting and the contemplative. These elements are intended to fuse together at times and contrast one another at others in an effort to reflect the Mormon worldview of the constant interplay of the spiritual and physical in this life. Mormons believe they are sent to Earth to gain physical bodies and experience a host of spiritual and physical experiences, all the while making choices that will bring the physical within a set to prescribed boundaries and thereby enhancing the spiritual. Previously, Dutcher successfully employed still, painterly shots resembling religious icons meant to give viewers a moment to pause and perhaps experience the "still small voice" of the Holy Ghost. He allowed silence and stillness to exist side-by-side with music and motion. He twined his icon moments with music-set montages, murders, romance, and gun battles. The still and the sexy worked together to both counter and enhance one another, giving viewers a taste of the experience of the Mormon worldview.

In *Falling*, Dutcher removes elements of both Hollywood and Holywood. There is silence of a sort, but absolutely no stillness. The film is marked by the total absence of non-diegetic

music. There is no score to speak of. The only music heard throughout the film is either played in the background by a guitar player at a funeral or over the radio in Eric Boyle's loud, old-fashioned jeep. The very traditional aspect of an opening score or music over the closer credits is absent here and replaced. The opening of the film, like *States of Grace*, is a black screen with white titles, but instead of cutting to an upbeat montage accompanied by rousing gospel music, the screen stays black and under it we hear the sound of a car coming to a screeching stop, the car door slamming, and footsteps running up stairs. The scene opens just as Eric Boyle bursts through the door of his house and a reverse shot reveals his wife, Davey, half naked and hanging by her neck, hung with a bed sheet. There is no blare of horns at the revelation nor is there tense string music as he cuts her down using a kitchen knife. There is no extra-worldly music in this world. The lives here are accompanied only by the sounds of one's own grunts and sobs. The complete lack of non-diegetic music in the film, rather than creating contemplative moments of theophany, seems more a stylistic choice to reflect a silent or even non-existent Heaven. There is no music in the fallen world of *Falling*. (As a side note, the fact that, after he cuts Davey's body down and is cradling it in his arms, Eric looks heavenward and repeats "Fuck you!" over and over again obviously suggests this is not going to like any Mormon film by Dutcher or anyone else before.) Music is an inherent part of Latter-Day Saint culture and obviously figured prominently in Dutcher's previous films. The choice to leave *Falling* naturalistically silent may have been an economic, practical choice – it's cheaper to not pay for a composer or music supervisor – but more likely than not, the choice to leave out traditional non-diegetic music seems more like a negation of what has come before rather than simply a different artistic choice.

The film's camera work and editing reject the deliberate thoughtfulness of *States of Grace's* confirmation scene or even the stillness of Elder Allen in *God's Army*, perched in profile

at his kitchen table as he ponders his faith. But then, the film also doesn't adhere to the typical Hollywood balance of handheld *and* Steadicam *and* crane *and* dolly. Instead, the vast majority of the film is shot using handheld cameras alone. Even shots that stay still and don't track any movement are handheld. In the opening sequence, after Eric cuts Davey down and tries to perform CPR on the dining room floor, even though the shots are static, there is still the tell-tale bobble of the frame. Nothing is at rest in this film, nothing gives viewers a moment to contemplate or feel as though there is solid ground on which to stand.

The Darkest, Lightest Place: Light Metaphors in *Falling*

The presence of light is a curious issue in this film. Again, like two of the first three films, it is set in sunny California, Hollywood to be exact. The cloudless, light-filled days that brought early movie producers there still serve as a symbol of the area and the films that take place there. While there are some night time sequences (Eric and Davey at home in bed), most of the film is set at midday in the brightest light possible. Eric trolls the streets of Hollywood, waiting to be called to the next suicide, house fire, or car crash, and Davey attends workshops and auditions all in the broad light of day. However, the light in this film is not the light of the other three. The grainy, desaturated stock renders a flat, hard, ugly look to the film. While there is plenty of light, the entire picture seems to be filmed through the bottom of a dirty shot glass. Even in the more sentimental, softer scenes, as when Boyle takes the son of a murdered friend out for a day in the park (and a visit to the LDS temple in Los Angeles), the light is diffused and washed out. There is brightness but no warmth. There is nothing to differentiate it from any other use of light in the film. Rather than being used as a spiritual metaphor, light is rendered inert, and its only symbolic power is its lack of symbolism. Rather than consciously employing light to show the constant presence or possibility of spiritual connection, Dutcher uses bleak, smoggy

light to apparently suggest that there is no spirit to connect with at all. As I mentioned before, Dutcher was hardly the first or even the thousandth film director to use light in a symbolically significant way. However, it is something unique for a Latter-Day Saint director to not try to harness light as a focused, directed tool of meaning in his films, especially as it relates to the concept of personal revelation and spiritual connection. To not use light is as meaningful as using it for a Mormon artist. To make a film that says, "Ugly, meaningless light falls on us all equally" is a powerful cultural and aesthetic statement for any filmmaker to make, but it is particularly significant for a post-Mormon to say it. The absence of light-as-symbol-of-spiritual-connector still reveals a post-LDS filmmaker who, at least at one time, believed deeply in it.

Nothing Welded: The Absence of Ordinances in *Falling*

The explicit Mormon content is kept to a minimum. Boyle stands in line behind two missionaries in a convenience store while he is waiting to get change for a payphone. In a brief flashback, he remembers himself as a missionary back when he was active in the church and, as mentioned, we see footage of Elder Dalton baptizing someone in the ocean. The sequence of shots lasts for literally just under five seconds. There is a shot of Dutcher as Dalton handing out flyers in *God's Army*, a shot of him baptizing someone in the ocean (a shot obviously made just for this film. Eric Boyle's shaggy, curly hair gives it away), and then another shot of Dalton walking up the beach to greet his companion. That tiny, five second slice of film is the only reference to any kind of Priesthood ordinance in the entire film. The absence of ordinances confirms Eric Boyle's non-Mormon nature in the narrative, but it does not necessarily demonstrate a non-Mormon nature of the film itself. While form and content are deeply connected in LDS spiritual film style and all of Dutcher's films to this point have featured each

component of the style in progressively more sophisticated and nuanced ways, that is not to say that there isn't an alternative route. In this case, *Falling* is an example of a kind of branch of Mormon film style because of how it is shaped by its absences. *Falling* is Dutcher's post-Mormon film, his dark-night-of-the-soul film, and I argue it could not have been made and certainly not made in the way it was without the influence of LDS spiritual film style. While *Falling* is not made in that style, it is certainly part of the larger world of Mormon cinema. LDS spiritual film style reflects the central beliefs and practices of Latter-Day Saints. Priesthood ordinances, those ceremonies and rites that Mormons believe form welding links between this world and the next, are too core, too essential to their concept of the world to not somehow have a significant place in a film by, for, or about Latter-Day Saints. Their utter absence here in a film so rife with pain, violence, suffering, and sin highlights their efficacy and centrality in the previous three films. However, their absence here is not an oversight or an arbitrary lack. Rather, the absence of Priesthood ordinances emphasizes the hopelessness Dutcher wants viewers to experience. When Davey is cut down, Eric doesn't even think of administering a blessing of healing. When Eric spends the day with his surrogate son, there's no talk of being baptized when the boy is eight years old. When Eric and Davey sit up at night, distraught over the scarcity of the spiritual state of being, they do not attend church the next Sunday to renew their baptismal covenants (although, it should be said that it's not clear whether or not Davey is also a lapsed Mormon or if it's just Eric.) The Priesthood tools a Latter-Day Saint might use to seek guidance or comfort from are notably, purposefully absent here. As much as the first three films in the quartet are intended to enable audiences to experience the Mormon Transcendent, the fourth film is designed to evoke a Mormon hell. No moments of peace, no music, no salvation, and only death to meet us at the end.

The Wild Elephant in the Room: Violence in *Falling*

One element of Mormon spiritual film style is half-present in *Falling*. Violence plays a major role in this film but in an entirely different way than it did in the first films of the quartet. Previously, people were beaten, thrown up against walls, attacked, sexually assaulted, shot, and even murdered so that either the victim or those somehow related to him or her could be saved. Violence created a need that caused characters to reach out spiritually in a way that enabled them to experience some kind of divine rescue. Violence created the need and the opportunity for the Mormon divine to act in the lives of the films' characters. Dalton and Kinegar's mild dust-up at the bus station is part of the final pressure that drives Elder Allen to his knees in prayer in *God's Army*. Terry Woodruff's suicide-by-police execution in *Brigham City* lays the groundwork for the cathartic passing of the Sacrament that begins Wes, the congregation, and the entire town on the path of repentance and relief. In *States of Grace*, Carl's gunshot wound brings him to the missionaries and baptism while the execution (not at his hand) of his brother's killer leads him to a second, more meaningful immersion and renunciation of his old life.

Bloody, brutal violence is more prevalent in *Falling* than in any of the other films (or than in most other films in general, really). A man's throat gets slit, a woman is raped and has her teeth knocked out, a man commits suicide by jumping from a ten story building, a man is stabbed repeatedly in the stomach and left to die in the street, and Eric nearly chokes Davey to death when he finds out she has had an abortion. The film begins with a murder and then a funeral for another murder. None of that even mentions the climactic battle Eric has with the three gang members he made famous by filming them as they stabbed a man to death. Dutcher shows increasingly over his first three films in the quartet that he is not afraid of depicting violence, but it was always in service of a story of salvation. In *Falling*, violence is used to tell a

story of damnation. In other words, the violence does not occur in this film in order for characters to be saved from it, but rather because they cannot be.

Non-Mormon Fusion

As in the confirmation/execution in *States of Grace*, there is one sequence in *Falling* that best illustrates how all the elements (or in this case, the absence of certain filmic components) combine to form the style and content of the film. The climactic sequence of the film lasts for seven minutes and forty five seconds, is without music, is almost entirely wordless, is brutally violent, and ends with a rather on-the-nose message of hopelessness. It is the purest synthesis of the film's aesthetics and themes.

Boyle's wife is dead. He's just stood on the steps of his house with a dozen reporters and video stringers (just like him) filming his pain and grief. Unable to speak, he retreats to a bar, downs one shot of alcohol, and then returns to his jeep (unfortunately parked in a deserted back parking lot) to destroy his tapes and camera equipment, the things that he feels clearly started all this tragedy. What he didn't realize is that his wife's killers followed him from his house and, now that he is alone and isolated, have decided to strike. The final sequence, beginning from the moment Boyle exits the bar, can be broken into three segments: the initial attack, the one-on-one battle, and the hallucination/death walk.

In the thirty five second long initial attack, handheld camera work follows Boyle as he breaks tapes in two and swings his camera into a dumpster. Quick flash shots of broken plastic at his feet cut back to him desperately digging through his bag, trying to get rid of everything. A back door opens and the camera backs up as the three gang members enter the parking lot. The retreating camera, bobbling as it goes, almost seems afraid of the fierce-looking men. A reverse

shot shows Boyle at a distance with his back to the camera/his attackers. Naturally, he looks small, unsuspecting, and helpless. The camera advanced rapidly on him, and there is a genuine sense of menace evoked by the viscerality of the camera movement here. The kineticism of the editing is almost too much at times. No one shot in this part of the sequence lasts longer than two and a half seconds. It is the very definition of rapid fire, and that combined with exclusively handheld camera work creates a dizzying, almost nauseating effect.

The camera then apes the Ed-advancing-on-Peg-with-the-shotgun angle from *Brigham City*, moving to a rear, waist-level position behind the lead gang member as he brandishes an even bigger, meaner-looking knife than the one that killed Todd in *States of Grace*. This time, instead of a fake out, the imminent violence is very real. The man grabs Boyle from behind, plunges the knife into the small of his back, and twists. Boyle finds the handgun given to him by his now-slain manager and manages to injure the first man and kill the other two. It's not presented in a brave, confident, Hollywood-hero sort of way, but rather Boyle looks frightened, clumsy, and desperate. The killings themselves, for that matter, are not presented in the sleek, easy PG13 mode of many Hollywood films nor are they shown in a flourished, smirking, Tarantio-esque, "Isn't that totally awesome?" mode of many independent American films. The violence is bloody and explicit, but it's neither narratively fun nor aesthetically exciting. More importantly, it doesn't contribute to any larger arc of salvation or rescue for anyone in the film. Brains explode out of the back of one gang member's head and then falls down with a confused look on his face. The second man takes two in the chest and he falls in a cloud of blood and dust. Boyle is momentarily spared because now the odds are a little more even, but this violence is more about simple mortal survival rather than about the creation of stepping stones to redemption of any kind.

Once the other two men are dead, the sequence shifts to an excruciating three minute and fourteen second one-on-one battle between Boyle and the last remaining gang member. Only three or four shots out of 107 in this portion of the sequence lasts more than three seconds. The remaining bullets in the gun are expended (some of them into the already dead men on the ground), then the serrated hunting knife is brought back into play. Once the knife is knocked out of reach, the gang member finds a 2 x 4 and tries to smash Boyle's head with it. At one point, Boyle digs his thumb into the open gunshot wound in the other man's arm and drives him to the ground. The two men wrestle back and forth in an exhausting, primal fight seemingly to simply see who can be the last one to die. Finally, pinned, bleeding, and hopeless, Boyle grasps onto a nearby brick and uses it to knock his attacker off of him. Then in a rapid-fire succession of shot, reverse shot, and flashback cutaways, Boyle straddles the man who killed his wife and smashes his head in with a brick. This portion of the sequence is grim to say the least. The camera cuts back and forth between the crushed face of the gang member to Davey's face as Boyle was choking her and then to the bloody, barely human face of the suicide that Eric filmed just a few days before. One would almost think this is meant to serve as a catharsis, but it does not. There is no release, there is no cleansing.

The gang member's face no longer resembles anything human, and Boyle is safe from any further attacks. However, the back of his shirt is covered in blood and he is very much worse for the wear from his fight. It is at this point the final portion of the climactic scene begins, Boyle's hallucination-filled death walk. As Boyle is hunched over the decimated carcass of his attacker, he looks and sees a young version of himself standing at a distance, watching. (We have seen this boy earlier in childhood photos of Boyle. He is played by Dutcher's son, Eli.) Boyle reaches out to him and the boy flees. The final four minutes of the film feature Boyle stumbling

out onto the sidewalk trying to chase this non-existent innocent, idealized version of himself while hallucinating that he is doing so on the grounds of the Latter-Day Saint Los Angeles temple. As in *States of Grace*, it is in the final moments of the film that it leaves the reality in which it has so firmly and grimly been planted for an hour and fifteen minutes. But rather than trying to conjure an ecstatic spiritual fantasia in which audience members are meant to experience the divine, *Falling's* departure from reality is a bloody, pain-induced fever dream.

Dutcher uses a similar kind of poetic editing here that he employed in the confirmation sequence of *States of Grace* but to an entirely different effect. He cuts back and forth between Boyle on the street and the temple grounds (not the actual LA temple grounds as the church would never allow a commercial film to be made there) both to evoke the experience of Boyle's hallucination and to draw thematic parallels. A handheld camera circles around Boyle as he hangs on to a parking meter to keep him on his feet, bleeding and drooling all over it as he clings to it. He looks up at the sun and, in the next shot, we see the sun from his p.o.v. but instead of seeing it through power lines and street signs, it is filtered through lacy trees at the temple. When the shot returns to Boyle, he is surrounded by the lush greenery of the gardens and fountains at the temple. When we see him trip and fall into the gutter on the street, he gets up from the sidewalk of the temple grounds. He is still a sweaty, bloody mess, but a bloody mess standing in a cool garden instead of a hot, deserted street. His hallucination is made real here.

Rather than being a place of calm oasis, however, the editing reveals the garden is a place of guilt, sorrow, and abandonment. The tree branches sway in the wind and in the next moment we see Davey's long hair swaying slightly as she hangs by her neck from the dining room ceiling. Pigeons fly off power lines when he cries out in pain on the street, and then we see the

pigeons his surrogate son chases off the temple lawn. Blood drops onto Boyle's shoe and in the next shot, we see the pierced hand of the giant white *Christus* statue from the temple grounds.

Replica statues of Bertel Thorvaldsen's *Christus Consolator* statue are featured in many LDS temple visitors centers across the United States, most prominently at the one in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. The arms of the statue are open and the church uses the image of the *Christus* to evoke an open "visitors are welcome" attitude as well as to echo Christ's invitation to "come unto him." In fact, earlier in the film when Boyle visits the LA temple grounds, a young female missionary shows tourists the statue and then reads a scripture that she says she thinks of when she looks at the *Christus*: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11.28-30). In Mormon culture, the image of the statue is one of comforting grandeur, as though this version of Christ is big enough and powerful enough to solve the world's problems. The version in the Salt Lake City temple visitor's center is eleven feet tall. The one featured here is still impressive at seven feet tall.

When the *Christus* comes into Boyle's hallucination, it is not a symbol of comfort. The parallel drawn between Boyle's dripping blood and the pierced but bloodless hand of the statue suggests that Eric is suffering through tremendous pain like Jesus did, but this Christ is unmoving and either unwilling or unable to provide any comfort or salvation. This great symbol of the comfort offered through the doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is rendered utterly cold and aloof. Eric is suddenly before the Christus in his hallucination, but the statue is shot mainly from behind so that only its massive white hand is in picture (tellingly, its left hand), dwarfing the bloody and pathetic Boyle. In another echo moment that is a dark,

reverse mirroring of the final shots of *States of Grace*, Boyle spontaneously drops to his knees before a representation of Christ. Rather than a living, bright-eyed baby giving out free smiles of approval and forgiveness, there is a giant, stony figure, so white and unmoving it suggests an arrogant otherworldliness more than comfort or compassion. Boyle sobs, "Help me!" and the camera cuts to a close up of the statue's face. It has no pupils in its eyes and so it appears blind and/or inhuman, not looking at Boyle but merely pointed in his direction.

One of the film's only truly motionless shots and the only one resembling Dutcher's icon moments from his earlier films is a wide angle shot with Boyle and the *Christus* both in profile. Boyle is in the bottom left hand portion of the shot, blood-soaked and sobbing, while the statue looms large, white and impassive, occupying most of the space on the right hand of the shot. Here, Dutcher actually subtly uses Mormon imagery of Christ's left and right hand, drawing from the *Book of Mormon* scripture stating that whoever takes on the name of Christ "shall be found at the right hand of God, for he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ. . . [and] whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God" (Mosiah 5.9-10). Boyle is at the statue's left hand in earlier shots and he is on the left hand of the screen in this one. This shot is actually anomalous within the film given its careful mise en scene and obvious LDS scriptural allusion. And while in that sense, it has some similarities to his earlier style, the overall message does not fit with the first three films. Boyle sobs and begs for help but receives none. This icon shot emphasizes the distance between the suffering of the mortal world and Christ's ability/willingness to do anything about it. The posture of the statue, normally seen as welcoming in a kind of a gathering position, actually looks as though it is recoiling from Boyle.

The scene returns Eric to the street where he finally collapses on the dirty sidewalk. The camera films him upside down as if to replicate his disorientation. He is on his back but looking downward from the top of the shot. He cries out and the camera cuts again to the impassive stony face of the pupil-less statue. Once the shot returns to Eric's face, Christ is no longer in the picture. Instead, young Eric walks up and looks down at the dying man with a look on his face as unmoved and impassive as the *Christus*. Boyle reaches out for him, for his innocence, for any time before the hell he's experiencing, and the boy darts away and disappears. There is no spiritual comfort, there is no temporal assistance, and even his own hallucination of his lost innocence abandons him to die. Boyle cries out one last time and the screen turns black. In voiceover, we hear a police radio report "a man down, covered in blood." There is no response to the report, no suggestion that help is on the way. Diegetic sounds of traffic continue as the credits roll. After thirty seconds or so, the sounds of traffic shift to the chirping of birds which accompany the remainder of the credits.

There is no redemption in *Falling*. There is no rescue for the characters (and by proxy, the audience) either from themselves or from the malevolent forces around them. More than anything else, it is this element that separates *Falling* from the other three films in the quartet. The ultimate intent of Mormon spiritual film style is to convey the intertwined nature of this world with a benevolent divine and to evoke an encounter with that divinity. Whether it is through the fusion and friction of Hollywood freneticism with painterly iconography or through the presence of spiritually efficacious ordinances or through the spiritual or physical salvation of characters from the effects caused by violence, a Mormon spiritual film style emphasizes that "all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that

there is a Supreme Creator" (Alma 30.44). The biographical link between Dutcher's loss of faith

and the practically tectonic shift in his film style for the fourth film in this series should not be

ignored. This is not to say that Dutcher was wrong to leave the church or that his loss of faith

was somehow inappropriate or inauthentic. Not at all. Those kinds of impossible judgments are

not part of this project. I am merely pointing out that, for better or worse, once he no longer

embraced a Latter-Day Saint point of view, the film he made was in a style that reflects a loss of

the Mormon concept of the divine rather than the affirmation of that idea. In some ways, one

could argue that Falling is actually just a natural extension of the Mormon concept of spiritual

development and that it fits neatly into the LDS theology. Mormon doctrine places heavy

emphasis on the Jesus Christ's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane that took place prior to his

crucifixion. It is there that Christ took upon him the suffering and pain of every living soul and

atoned for them. Mormons believe that because Christ suffered the punishment for our sins, he

has perfect empathy for every person and can lift that suffering from us if we turn to God

through him and repent. The most crucial part of the Atonement was when God withdrew the

Holy Ghost's presence from Jesus in order for him to truly experience the loneliness and

isolation of sin. Church leader Jeffrey R. Holland spoke about this removal of the spirit from

Jesus:

> Now I speak very carefully, even reverently, of what may have been the most difficult moment in all of this solitary journey to Atonement. I speak of those final moments for which Jesus must have been prepared intellectually and physically but which He may not have fully anticipated emotionally and spiritually—that concluding descent into the paralyzing despair of divine withdrawal when He cries in ultimate loneliness, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"
>
> The loss of mortal support He had anticipated, but apparently He had not comprehended this. Had He not said to His disciples, "Behold, the hour … is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me" and "The Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him"?

With all the conviction of my soul I testify that He did please His Father perfectly and that a perfect Father did not forsake His Son in that hour. Indeed, it is my personal belief that in all of Christ's mortal ministry the Father may never have been closer to His Son than in these agonizing final moments of suffering. Nevertheless, that the supreme sacrifice of His Son might be as complete as it was voluntary and solitary, the Father briefly withdrew from Jesus the comfort of His Spirit, the support of His personal presence. It was required, indeed it was central to the significance of the Atonement, that this perfect Son who had never spoken ill nor done wrong nor touched an unclean thing had to know how the rest of humankind—us, all of us—would feel when we did commit such sins. For His Atonement to be infinite and eternal, He had to feel what it was like to die not only physically but spiritually, to sense what it was like to have the divine Spirit withdraw, leaving one *feeling totally, abjectly, hopelessly alone* ("None Were With Him" emphasis added).

I argue that *Falling's* spiritual bleakness, its lack of an "ultimate concern" could be read as a filmic extension of the abject isolation a post-Mormon might experience. Latter-Day Saints believe that, as baptized members of the church, they are entitled to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost as long as they do their best to follow the commandments. This means they live their lives with the feeling that an actual member of the Godhead is there to comfort, guide, teach, and protect at all times. It is a profound concept and certainly one that influences the amount of confidence and peace with which one goes through the world. So, to lose that, to be without that sense of protection and guidance is a deeply hopeless, abysmal feeling. *Falling* may not be filmed or edited in LDS spiritual film style, but it absolutely has a place in the larger world of Mormon cinema as a movie shaped by its absences, a work utterly influenced by what is no longer there. As much as the first three films evoke the Mormon Transcendent, *Falling* evokes its loss.

Conclusion: Memoir, Autoethnography, and Style That Parts the Veil

It was spring time in Boise, Idaho in 2000. My wife and I had just moved there from the far side of state after I finished my bachelor's degree and got accepted into the MFA program at Boise State. My assistantship didn't start until August, and we had bills to pay. I checked groceries at a local supermarket and my more marketable wife got work as a tech writer. We scraped a living together and spent our then-childless evenings driving around our new city, exploring the seemingly endless parks, and going to lots of movies. In addition to the faux movie palace megaplex out by the airport and a couple of slightly sketchy looking second-run theaters on the bench, Boise is home to an actual movie palace. The Egyptian Theater on the corner of Capitol and Main was built in 1927 and restored in the early 1990s ("About"). The gilded proscenium of the theater features hieroglyphics, golden pharaohs, hand-carved scarabs, and all the atmosphere and romance a movie dork like myself could possibly ask for. Rumor had it that Jimmy Stewart used to come and play the organ at the Egyptian when he was an Army Air Corp trainee at nearby Gowen Field during World War II.

As a young, barely employed grad student with a wife and kids in our future, the second-run theaters usually got our business, but needless to say, I always preferred the Egyptian and jumped at any excuse to see a movie there. That spring, local media had paid a lot of attention to a new independent film out of Utah called *God's Army*. Purportedly, it was by a Mormon guy and was about what it's like to actually serve a real LDS mission. My wife and I had both served missions for the church. I lived in Mississippi and Louisiana for two years, having beer cans thrown at me from moving cars and being spit on by kids as we walked down street after humid street knocking on doors, asking people if they'd like to learn more about the *Book of Mormon*. My wife served her mission in the Czech Republic, where she learned the language and customs

while navigating sometimes less-than-modern living conditions and a culture that was a weird mixture of deeply entrenched Catholicism and hostile, barely post-Communist atheism. We had only been back from these intense, personal, challenging experiences for a couple of years. They were still very much on our minds and in our daily conversations. To see an honest-to-goodness, theatrically-released film that took these experiences seriously was something that I was both excited and trepidatious about. I had seen plenty of institutionally produced Church films about missionary service – *Called to Serve* (Treu, 1983) and *Labor of Love* (McLean, 1990) being the two most prominent, but even before I served a mission of my own, I recognized them for the glossy, unrealistic propaganda they are. Serving a mission was something so personal to me and such a universal hallmark of my religion, I loved the idea of seeing a "real" film about it but feared how wrong it might be.

I had read the reviews in the papers and watched for coverage during the entertainment segments of the local news. I grilled anyone I met who had seen the film, asking them what they thought, trying to get a sense of what this thing even was. The movie opened in Utah in March of 2000 and by June had seen enough success to make it into wider markets. I saw in the *Boise Weekly* that *God's Army* was going to be at the Egyptian. That combination was a lock for me. My wife and I pulled up to the Egyptian a little before seven, bought some popcorn and Pepsi in the lamp lit concession stand in the lobby and found our seats.

My initial tendency was to pick apart everything that seemed "wrong" or unrealistic to me. After the movie, much of my half of the conversation consisted of things like "That missionary's hair is way too long. No mission president would ever allow that" and "Missions have fleets of well-kept cars. No Elders are going to be driving around in some beat-up VW van." At the time, of course, I was hung up on the details and didn't know enough or think

enough to realize that there might be more to this film and its maker. I didn't have much sense for the bigger picture, nor did I know anything about ethnography, autoethnography, or the concept of slippage.

Kristina Medford tells us that there may be a reason for not getting every exact detail of an autoethnographic story "right." She writes of "mindful slippage – the details we purposefully include and/or exclude" as one tries to write "the Truth" about one's own culture (861). In trying to get at the heart of a story about one's own culture or worldview or belief system, sometimes there's room between what actually happens and what ends up being recorded. In that room, that slippage, is where the Truth, as it were, can sometimes be found. If one can overlook or perhaps even embrace these mindful inclusions and exclusions, perhaps the "primary concern" of a culture can be revealed.

In focusing on the haircuts or the vehicles featured in the film, I was missing the point. I wasn't seeing the Truth revealed beyond the slippage. What Dutcher was doing was creating a filmic autoethnography, a study from within his own religious culture, an examination of the preoccupations, mores, symbols, and practices of Mormonism. The outer trappings of the film mattered much less than the worldview from which it was made. As I quoted Dutcher earlier, the purpose of his film was to "let the rest of humanity see the world through my Mormon eyes. If they liked the way the world looks through those eyes, great. Welcome aboard. If they don't, that's fine too. At least we've communicated. They know me better and understand me better, and hopefully they know and understand Mormonism better as well" (Bigelow 11). Dutcher's project wasn't to make more Mormons but rather to make films that were Mormon. He wanted to make films that not only featured explicitly LDS content but that were filmed in a style that was both reflective and evocative of the Mormon concept of the Transcendent.

Arriving back at our small apartment near BSU campus that night, still talking about *God's Army,* I didn't know what Dutcher was up to nor did I have any concept that I would still be talking about his movies fourteen years later. I can track pieces of my personal history as they related to Dutcher's cinematic history: In 2001, I remember seeing the trailer for *Brigham City* online during my third year of grad school and feeling a thrill because I sensed this next film was going to be something darker, more ambitious, and even more provocative than the last. I remember interviewing Dutcher at Brigham Young University-Idaho in 2002 when he came to speak at a forum there and him talking about his dream about building a figurative temple of art within the church. I taped an hour long interview with him that day which my boss at the KBSU radio station later erased off our hard drive because he didn't think I'd need it. I remember finding the only theater in all of southern Idaho still playing *States of Grace* over the Thanksgiving break of 2005 with my wife and a friend from work. Far from the days of the Egyptian theater, we found the movie in a decaying second-run single screen theater in downtown Idaho Falls on a snowy night. The three of us holed up in an all-night pancake house after the movie and picked it apart for two hours. And too, I remember being the midst of my course work at Wayne State in 2007 and hearing the news that Dutcher was leaving the church. He publically announced that he no longer believed in the Latter-Day Saint church and that "it does not appear that it will be my honor to make some of these films that the LDS community so desperately needs" ("Parting Words"). Later, in 2009, thanks to the magic of Facebook, I tracked him down and persuaded him to send me a screener copy of *Falling*, the much buzzed about but little seen post-belief film he had made.

As I was living my life and navigating my own occasionally conflicted, difficult relationship with the Mormon faith, I think I unconsciously began identifying with Dutcher. His

films, at least for a time, demonstrated to me that it was possible to be a believing Mormon while still recognizing the faults, questions, and contradictions present within the LDS faith. They showed that it was possible to both be a Latter-Day Saint and someone who creates artistically accomplished, emotionally engaging, and intellectually challenging work. I also began to realize that Dutcher had made work that was not just Mormon in its content but in its form. When I entered the PhD program at Wayne State, I looked harder than I ever had at how a film is physically constructed, from the angle and height of the camera to the film stock to the way a scene transitions from one moment to the next to the inclusion or exclusion of music. I understood the concept of a film "style" beyond my initial, amateur idea of it as a matter of genre or just cinematography. I encountered Paul Schrader's book *Spiritual Film Style* toward the end of my coursework at Wayne, and it was an important text in the development of my thinking about Dutcher's films. The book suggests that film style can do more than just provoke emotional or intellectual reactions in viewers but can potentially evoke encounters with the Transcendent. This concept resonated with me as a Mormon taught from an early age that people can experience the Divine in even the most mundane, "worldly" of circumstances. However, the filmmakers that Schrader cites, Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer, and later filmmakers that have been associated with his ideas like Tarkovsky didn't seem to have much to do with Dutcher's more mainstream, overtly religious movies.

As I studied Schrader and other film critics who concern themselves with the intersections of film, religion, and spirituality like S. Brent Plate and Clive Marsh, I struggled to find the connection between all their big ideas and Dutcher's seemingly narrow, highly culturally specific films. It seemed as though there was more to his work than just a kind of cinematic religious regionalism, but I wasn't sure what. It was Marsh's writings about religious specificity

that suddenly drew everything into sharp focus. I realized that Dutcher's films did not have to match Schrader's (or anyone else's) concept of a spiritual film style, and that, in fact, it probably shouldn't. Religious specificity became the order of the day, and how the cultural, doctrinal, and symbolic specificity of Mormonism did or did not find its way into the cinematic style of Dutcher's films became my question. I began to find connections between the Mormon preoccupation with light as a spiritual symbol and Dutcher's cinematography and mise en scene. I saw links between the catalytic nature of violence in Mormon doctrine and history and its catalytic, salvific narrative role in the Mormon quartet. I realized how the LDS belief in a simultaneously physical and spiritual existence was mirrored in both the form and content of Dutcher's movies. I recognized how Dutcher's films lean on the efficacy of Priesthood ordinances. Seeing the omissions from *Falling*, the presence of these elements in the first three films became all the more apparent. It became clear to me that I could at least suggest a possible Mormon spiritual film style and that this suggested style could be something new within my little niche of film studies.

I return to Randy Astle's concept of the movie screen as a veil. Veils play an important role in Mormon culture. When describing the Plan of Salvation, the roadmap if you will, of life as Mormons see it, Latter-Day Saint teachings talk about a veil of forgetfulness that was drawn across our consciousness when we left God's presence to come to earth and gain a physical body. In ordinances that take place in LDS temples, participants are taken through an actual, physical veil to symbolize passing from a lower plane into a higher, celestial world. Veils often represent a separation – man from God, one world from the next – but at the same time, the thing that separates is also the thing that links. The veil is a point of nexus as much as it is barrier. LDS Church leader Bruce Hafen explains that this veil , "not only. . . keep[s] us from remembering

our past, which we call the preexistence, but also it keeps us from seeing many things that are going on at the present—for God, his angels, and their activities are hidden from our sight" ("Value of the Veil"). Hafen's comment emphasizes the separation aspect of veils, how they are meant to keep us from the invisible world that Latter-Day Saints believe co-exists with the visible, mortal world where we live. However, other church authorities lean more heavily on the idea that the veil may not be as much of a barrier. Boyd K. Packer, currently next in line to become President and prophet of the LDS church, writes, "I remind you that it is a veil, not a wall, that separates us from the spirit world . . . Veils can become thin, even parted" ("Covenants"). A veil can potentially be a barrier, but more often than not in the LDS worldview, a veil is something to be parted by an omniscient hand. It is something to be communicated through, to be passed through. Rather than an impassable wall, I suggest that, in fact, it is actually a medium in the Mormon worldview – a conveyor of information and inspiration. It is a surface that brings the mortal and the transcendent together on either side and allows for there to be communication between. If we look at the film screen as a veil, as Mormons must (because the whole world is potentially a site for theophany), it becomes clear how Dutcher's work in particular can be a nexus, a place where mortal viewers can experience an immortal Transcendent as Latter-Day Saints understand it.

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God's Army. Dir. Richard Dutcher. Perf. Richard Dutcher, Matthew A. Brown, and

  Jacque Gray. Zion Films, 2000. DVD.

The Godfather. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Al Pacino, Marlon Brando. Paramount, 1972.

  DVD.

The Home Teachers. Dir. Kurt Hale. Perf. Michael Birkeland, Jeff Birk. Halestorm

  Entertainment, 2004. DVD.

How Near to the Angels. Dir. Judge Whitaker. Perf. Mary Anderson, Wid Tingey. The

  Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1956. Film.

How Rare a Possession. Dir. Russell Holt. Perf. Mark Deakins, Bruce Newbold. The

  Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1987. DVD.

Ice Cream and Elevators. Dir. Robert Starling, Dean Stubbs. Perf. Ernest L. Wilkinson. The

  Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1971. Film.

Joseph Smith: The Man. Dir. T.C. Christensen. Perf. Lethe Coleman Tatge. The Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1980. Film.

Johnny Lingo. Dir. Judge Whitaker. Perf. Makee K. Blaisdell, Naomi Kahoilua. The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1969. DVD.

Labor of Love. Dir. Michael McLean. Perf. Fred Hunting, Jim Beatty. The Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1990. VHS.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Dir. Martin Scorcese. Perf. Willem Dafoe, Harvey Keitel.

Universal, 1988. DVD.

Latter Days. Dir. C. Jay Cox. Perf. Wes Ramsey, Steve Sandvoss. Funny Boy Films,

2003. DVD.

Legacy. Dir. Kieth Merrill. Perf. Kathleen Beller, Marcus Gilbert. The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-Day Saints, 1990. DVD.

The Legend of Johnny Lingo. Dir. Steven Ramirez. Perf. George, Henare, Riwia Brown,

John Garbett. MGM, 2004. DVD.

Man's Search for Happiness. Dir. Judge Whitaker. Perf. Richard L. Evans, S. Bryce

Chamberlain. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1964. Film.

Millions. Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. Alexander Etel, Lewis McGibbon. Fox Searchlight,

2004. DVD

The Mormon Battalion. Dir. Edward Finney. Perf. Unknown. Edward Finney Productions, 1950.

Film.

A Mormon Maid. Dir. Robert Z. Leonard. Perf. Mae Murray, Frank Borzarge. Jesse

Lasky Feature Play Company, 1917. DVD.

Mouchette. Dir. Robert Bresson. Perf. Nadine Nortier, Jean-Claude Guilbert. UGC/CFDC, 1967.

DVD.

The Mountain of the Lord. Dir. Peter N. Johnson. Perf. Cory Dangerfield, Scot Silver. The

    Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1993. VHS.

Mr. Krueger's Christmas. Dir. Kieth Merrill. Perf. Jimmy Stewart, Kamee Merrill. The Church

    of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1980. DVD.

Noah. Dir. Darren Aronofsky. Perf. Russell Crowe, Jennifer Connelly. Paramount, 2014. Film.

Nostalghia. Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky. Perf. Oleg Yankovsky, Domiziana Giordano. Mosfilm,

    1983. DVD.

Oliver Cowdery, Witness to the Book of Mormon. Dir. Mel Marshall. Perf. Unknown. Seagull

    Film Productions, 1954. Film.

On The Way Home. Dir. Kieth Merrill. Perf. Kara Margetts, David Jacobs. The Church of Jesus

    Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1992. VHS.

One Hundred Years of Mormonism. Dir. Norval MacGregor. Perf. Frank Young. The Church of

    Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1913. Film.

Orgazmo. Dir. Trey Parker. Perf. Trey Parker, Dian Bachar. October Films, 1998. DVD.

The Other Side of Heaven. Dir. Mitch Davis. Perf. Christopher Gorham, Anne Hathaway.

    Disney, 2001. DVD.

The Passion of the Christ. Dir. Mel Gibson. Perf. Jim Cavielzel, Maia Morgenstern. Icon

    Productions, 2004. DVD.

Perilous Journey. Dir. John Linton. Perf. Unknown. Excel Entertainment, 1983. Film.

Pioneers in Petticoats. Dir. Judge Whitaker. Perf. Melinda Cummings, Jillanne Duce. The

    Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1969. Film.

Pride and Predjudice. Dir. Andrew Black. Perf. Kam Heskin, Ben Gourley. Excel

Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

Priest. Dir. Antonia Bird. Perf. Linus Roache, Tom Wilkinson. BBC Films, 1995. Film.

The R.M. Dir. Kurt Hale. Perf. Kirby Heyborne, Will Swenson. Halestorm

    Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

Saints and Soldiers. Dir. Ryan Little. Perf. Corbin Allred, Alexander Niver. Excel

    Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

Salt Lake City Company of Rocky Mountain Riders. Dir. Unknown. Perf. Unknown.

    American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1898. Film.

The Silence of the Lambs. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Perf. Jodie Foster, Scott Glenn. Orion, 1991.

    DVD.

Singles Ward. Dir. Kurt Hale. Perf. Will Swenson, Connie Young. Halestorm

    Entertainment, 2002. DVD.

Stalker. Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky. Perf. Alexander Kaidanovsky, Anatoli Solonitsyn, Nikolai

    Grinko. Mosfilm, 1979. DVD.

Star Wars. Dir. George Lucas. Perf. Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Alec Guinness. 20th Century

    Fox, 1977. Film.

States of Grace. Dir. Richard Dutcher. Perf. Ignacio Serricchio, Lucas Fleisher, Lamont

    Stephens. Zion Pictures, 2005. DVD.

The Ten Commandments. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Perf. Charlton Heston, Yul Brenner. Paramount,

    1956. DVD.

The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd. Dir. Keith Merrill. Perf. Rick Macy, Jeremy W.

    Hoop. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2000. DVD.

To This End Was I Born. Dir. Russell Holt. Perf. Unknown. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1992. DVD.

Together Forever. Dir. Michael McLean. Perf. Unknown. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1987. DVD.

Trapped by the Mormons. Dir. H.B. Parkinson. Perf. Evelyn Brent, Louis Willoughby. 1922. Film.

A Trip to Salt Lake City. Dir. Unknown. Perf. Unknown. American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1905. ?

A Victim of the Mormons. Dir. August Blom. Perf. Valdemar Psilander, Clara Wieth. Nordisk Film, 1912. Film.

Wagon Master. Dir. John Ford. Perf. Ben Johnson, Harry Carey Jr., Ward Bond. RKO, 1950. DVD.

Where the Saints Have Trod. Dir. Frank S. Wise. Perf. George Albert Smith. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. 1946. Film.

The Windows of Heaven. Dir. Judge Whitaker. Perf. Francis Urry, John B. Fetzer. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1963. DVD.

The Wizard of Oz. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Judy Garland, Frank Morgan. MGM, 1939. DVD.

The Work and the Glory. Dir. Russell Holt. Perf. Sam Hennings, Brenda Strong. Excel Entertainment, 2004. DVD.

The Work and the Glory: American Zion. Dir. Sterling Van Wagenen. Perf. Sam Hennings, Brenda Strong. Excel Entertainment, 2005. DVD.

The Work and the Glory: A House Divided. Dir. Sterling Van Wagenen. Perf. Sam Hennings, Brenda Strong. Excel Entertainment, 2007. DVD.

ABSTRACT

IN PARTICULARITY WE TRUST: RICHARD DUTCHER'S MORMON QUARTET AND A LATTER-DAY SAINT SPIRITUAL FILM STYLE

by

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Advisor: Dr. Steven Shaviro

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Between 2000 and 2008, writer/director Richard Dutcher made four films with narratives focused primarily on members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The films are explicitly Mormon-related in their content, but I argue they are also inherently Mormon in their style. Critic and filmmaker Paul Schrader argues there is a particular style of filmmaking, a dialect of the cinematic language if you will, that enables viewers to experience an encounter with a Transcendent Divinity. The contention of this dissertation is that Schrader's views were simultaneously too general and too narrow. I draw on Clive Marsh's call for an embrace of religious particularity in film criticism and scholarship and reject the idea of some "universal" filmic style that evokes the Transcendent for all viewers.

Rather than ignore the doctrinal, cultural, and historical specifics of a particular religion, I mine the specifics on my own religion, Mormonism, and examine Dutcher's movies through those lenses in order to discover how a Mormon Transcendent might be evoked through film. I take Marsh's concept and enact it here in hopes of finding how religious particularity can create greater insight into religious and/or spiritual films and generate greater opportunity for encounters with the Transcendent for viewers. Dutcher's movies attempt to fuse style and content in a way that is reflective of Mormon history, doctrine, and worldview. While the style is

tentative at first and evolves over the course of his quartet, his films give successful on-screen

concretion to elements of Mormonism that allow viewers to experience Latter-Day Saint Divine.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Mark Brown was born in Pocatello, Idaho in 1974. He earned an AA in Humanities from Ricks College, a BA in English from Idaho State University, and an MFA in poetry from Boise State University. He has been following, writing about, and researching Richard Dutcher's films and Mormon cinema for over a decade. He currently teaches composition, Introduction to Film, and the Art of the American Film at Delta College where he is a full-time, tenure-track instructor. He also hosts a weekly film review program on Q90.1, the local NPR affiliate. He is married to the former Suzanne Day, and together they have three daughters.