

## THE ART OF FILMMAKING

*Richard Dutcher*

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A friend of mine, on a trip several years ago, said something that has stayed with me. We were talking generally about art, and he said that what he loved about art was that it brought people closer together. Painters, musicians, filmmakers, or playwrights express themselves in some concrete way. They either hang their expression on a wall or project it in a movie theatre, and other people can come and see what they have produced. Through art the artist and the audience can communicate. It doesn't matter if one person is Russian and the other is Chinese. It doesn't matter if one is Mormon and the other is Hindu. If the art is well done and if both parties are sincere, they come closer together because the observer walks away understanding the artist better.

I love that! Previously, I had not thought about art this way, but now I am less judgmental about works of art because I'll stand in front of paintings and try to understand what the artists are saying. I'll trust that they are sincere, and I'll listen to what they have to say. Regardless of whether I accept or reject their message, I will surely understand more about that artist, his or her culture, and the world we both live in.

I want to talk about the art of Mormon filmmaking and the art of spiritual filmmaking. Though I'm going to be talking about filmmaking, I would like you understand it more universally. You may draw some universal truths regarding art and creativity. How many of you are creative or want to do something at some point in your life that's creative? (Don't restrict yourselves to just film, theater, painting, whatever.) Let me see a raise of hands. This drive is inborn within us, right? It's a divine attribute; I know it is. Our Father in Heaven is a Creator. We are his children. Eventually, if we do things right, we will be Creators. So, as I'm speaking about filmmaking, think about these same ideas in terms of literature, painting, even raising children. Don't think, "Well, that's interesting, but I don't know how that applies to me." I believe that these ideas apply to every one of us and that we have such a potential to do something that we do not understand yet.

I'm just starting to understand filmmaking as art. Recently some critics/reviewers of my films stopped referring to me as a Mormon filmmaker and started to say, "He's a spiritual filmmaker in the tradition of . . ." and they would mention names—Ozu, Bresson, and Tarkovsky. I didn't know these people, even though I had been to film school, so I did

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a little research. I wanted to know who these spiritual filmmakers were. I was looking for kindred spirits out there—whom I wasn't really finding in the Mormon community—the real filmmaking spiritual brotherhood that I wanted. I thought perhaps there were other filmmakers who lived, worked, and died with whom I could connect. A great benefit of art is that you can span generations. The men and women who died hundreds of years ago can speak to us and tell us something. So I started to look at these filmmakers, and I started to realize how very, very few of them there are.

To understand my relationship with these other filmmakers, let's backtrack a little bit and look at the history of filmmaking. At the dawn of cinema in 1890, when the very first images were made, they were simple images—a man with a water hose, a young couple feeding their baby, a train approaching a station—simple things, but they were very powerful. It was a whole new technology, a whole new art form.

Interestingly enough, they projected these movies and people paid a nickel to see them. And these movies made a lot of money. We've come a long way in 110 years in the development of filmmaking. But in some ways we haven't. As soon as this new art form started to make a little bit of money, in came the business people and they took control of it. They took out their patents and created the foundation of the filmmaking world we now live in. Commercial filmmaking has one environment, which is the marketplace. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that 99.9 percent of the uses of film have been to make money, to give popularity and power to people with the movie cameras. I don't believe that's a cynical outlook. Any serious student of film can see this pattern.

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Occasionally there have been efforts to do something else with filmmaking, to explore and experiment with cinema; but so little has been accomplished because filmmaking is so expensive. Also, filmmaking has proceeded successfully along this one track, so there hasn't been motivation for exploration in the past 110 years. We can make the most entertaining films that have ever been made, but we haven't really accomplished much else with this medium of expression.

Now, why do I tell you that? This history introduces the question, "What will Mormons do with this art form?" Until recently, Mormon filmmaking didn't really exist. In the past we have had very good actors, some good writers, some good directors, some good crewmembers in this field. What have they been doing? I have a long answer to that, which I won't go into. Let's put the past behind us. We're in a new place as far as filmmaking goes.

In 2002 we have a Mormon film industry producing Mormon films, films about our people and about our culture. Isn't that amazing? Who would have thought that could have happened? Three years ago, when I

was trying to raise money to make *God's Army*, people couldn't understand why someone would make a movie about Mormon missionaries. Why would anyone pay to see that? People also questioned whether, morally, it should be done. Regardless, here we are. We have this Mormon film industry, but what are we going to do with it? How are we going to use it? Are we going to use it purely for commercial purposes? Are we going to behave like all the others and exploit this technology in order to make some of us richer and more popular? Or are we going to do something else with it? If so, what can we do with Mormon cinema?

This question ties me back to my realization that I was in a very small company of filmmakers, so called "spiritual filmmakers," who have an interest in something other than just entertaining people—filmmakers who have an interest in personally trying to get a little closer to God, trying to understand and communicate a piece of eternal truth through filmmaking (which is what I think filmmaking should be about).

What a great opportunity for LDS filmmakers. What a great advantage we have. Yet if Mormon filmmakers chase the dollar instead of the truth, we will never explore the possibilities of this new medium, and we won't belong in the company of spiritual filmmakers. We will never use film for what it was created for. And if we chase the dollar, I believe we will have not only done a disservice, that is an understatement, but we will have hidden the talent that our Lord has given us. We have a great responsibility.

So what am I trying to communicate to you? First, the art of filmmaking can be a sacred art. I see its potential. It's almost similar to the way we should see a child's potential. When looking at a child, do you see a little kid who has a runny nose, dirty clothes, and who can't pronounce words very well? Or do you see in that child the magnificent being that he really is? Do you see the god that he may become? This is similar to how we see moviemaking. Many people, Mormons included, still think of film as a snotty little kid . . . fun to be around, but not very important, not very powerful. They don't see its potential. They don't understand what it can do.

So what do we have to say to the world through filmmaking? What kind of stories do Mormons have to tell? This is the question I try to answer when I'm raising money in order to make a film. To help answer this question, let me share a recent conversation I had with a fellow LDS filmmaker. We were talking about the filmmaking business, about how things were going. Speaking of his role models, this man said he wanted to be a filmmaker like John Hughes. For those of you who don't know who John Hughes is, he was a very popular filmmaker in the 80s and early 90s. He made movies such as *Pretty in Pink*, *Some Kind of Wonderful*, *Home Alone*, and *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*. This LDS director said,

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“That’s what I want to do. I want to make films like that.” I came away from that discussion really discouraged and kind of depressed. I thought, “Here is a returned missionary, elders quorum president, married. He has children. He has experiences. And now he has the opportunity to get behind a movie camera, and what does he want to do? He wants to make a Mormon version of *Home Alone*.” Often then he will remove any religious elements from his work and make mainstream movies. To him, LDS cinema is a springboard to Hollywood. I don’t know what to do with that. And yet I see it so often.

I sense something dangerously wrong here; we as a people have not recognized film as anything other than pure entertainment. We don’t see it as anything other than a background setting for digesting our popcorn. Now here is the dilemma. Our Mormon film industry, this innocent little child of two years ago, is beginning to grow up. But what kind of adult is it going to be? Is it going to imitate Hollywood? We’ve seen what Hollywood has done with film over the past 110 years. Are we going to do that same exact thing?

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If we’re only interested in commercial films, if we’re only going to take commercial ideas and slap a little Mormonism into them and then market them to Mormons, we’re not going to offer anything that the world needs. We’re not going to do any good. However, could we say, “You know what? Hollywood has kind of messed up filmmaking. They haven’t really done much with this beautiful, wonderful thing; but we could”?

One thing that we can do and should do, and I hope that we eventually will do, is break from the accepted narrative form and start doing things that Hollywood hasn’t done, that no one has ever done. I think the more immediate thing we can do is tell our own stories for our own people. We don’t need one single non-Mormon to see our films. And I don’t say this to be exclusionary. I’m just saying that we don’t need to seek the approval of the outside world.

I’d like to expand on this idea by sharing a dream I had last year. This description comes from my journal dated March 1, 2001:

A few nights ago I had a dream. I was building a temple in the desert; perhaps it was more of a museum. It wasn’t a building for religious ordinances or structured worship. It was a beautiful building—tall, sculpted walls and ceilings. With the help of several assistants, I was filling the building with art. There were paintings and sculptures and beautiful architecture, all with the purpose of glorifying and worshipping God—truly beautiful art. The feelings between me and the other workers were comfortable and brotherly. And just beyond the front doors were sand dunes. We were perhaps hundreds of miles from any city or town.

I knew in the dream that few, if any, outsiders would ever see our temple, but I knew that it didn't matter because we were building it for the Lord. It was a happy dream, joyful. I was happy in it and happy when I awoke.

Isn't that a great dream? I believe it was more than just a dream. I believe it came from the Lord. The Spirit was teaching me something important about my role in filmmaking.

We need to tell our own stories for our own people. We don't need Hollywood's distribution machine. *Brigham City* was marketed specifically toward the Mormon audience, but afterwards it did well enough and received enough critical acclaim that we had interest from mainstream distributors. A mainstream distributor picked it up for video and DVD distribution. The same thing happened with *The Other Side of Heaven*. But an interesting thing is going to happen. When we look back on this time period, we're going to see that it would have been wiser, smarter to stay within our own community and build our own resources and to make films for our own people.

There's so much talk about crossover. I have people pitching ideas to me like I'm some Hollywood executive. They present ideas saying, "It's like *Back to the Future* meets *Together Forever*." These people need to step back and look at themselves. They need to think about who they are, what their opportunities are, and what they're doing. Sure we could make this type of movie, and people would probably go see it. It would be kind of cute and kind of funny, but should we be doing that? No, we should be doing something else.

Right now there's a big movie out called *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. A lot of you have seen it, probably more than have seen *Brigham City*. Shame on you. Right now all we hear in the Mormon film community is, "We need a *Big Fat Mormon Wedding*. Maybe that will make \$200 million." It's always the dollars that come into the conversation.

When I made *God's Army*, I was disappointed that the discussion focused on how much money this film was making, not about what happened to these missionaries. These were my experiences. I had divided these experiences between the characters so that each one had a little piece of me. When they bore their testimony or experienced something, it was my testimony that was being born; it was something that I had gone through. I was so proud of this film because I was trying to tell my Mormon experience as honestly as I could tell it. Those were my experiences; that was the way it was. And I enjoyed sharing those experiences and talking about the film. Sadly, conversations about the missionaries' experiences dropped off, and the focus stayed on the money the film earned.

If we're following the world's trends and focus solely on making money, then what will we offer that is unique? For all you creative people out

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there, trust yourselves and own this community that we live in. We should make films about our own experiences for our own people.

I do love it when non-Mormons see my films as well. I love to see a non-Mormon crying at the end of *Brigham City* because then I know I've connected. I've communicated. By making my main character a bishop, I'm able to show the world my view of the LDS community—some of the really wonderful things and some of the dangers. And they come out feeling closer to us. They come out understanding us a little bit better and, hopefully, liking us a little bit better. One of the most satisfying compliments *God's Army* received came from non-Mormon reviewers who said, "Well, we liked the movie. It wasn't the best. It had some good things in it, but we'll sure look at those boys on the bicycles differently the next time we see them. We won't slam the door in their faces the next time we see them." After reading these reviews, I thought, "Yes! We've done it." I've made a connection with someone that I wouldn't have made otherwise.

Even so, we should have our own industry for our own people. We can make our own films; we can write our own books. We have a community. Let me give you some perspective here. I recently saw the demographic numbers of several religious groups in the United States. Being in the entertainment industry and seeking good, quality spiritual material, I've always been drawn to Jewish work. The Jewish entertainment and art community has produced several great books, films, and plays. But I saw a number that staggered me. There are approximately 6 million Jews living in the United States. That number made no sense to me. I thought that surely there must be 50 million because of the impact they've had in the media. Look at the art that they have produced. Then I wondered how many Mormons there are in the United States. You don't want to know. You don't want to put those two numbers together because we don't come off too well. What have we been doing? Where are our stories? Where's the Mormon *My Name is Asher Lev* and where's the Mormon *Fiddler on the Roof*? I believe they're about to happen, but we're just barely awakening to the fact that we can do this and that we have something to offer.

As a writer, before I came upon this idea of making films for Mormon audiences, I was just trying to write something that sold. I was chasing the golden coin just like everybody else: so I'd write a romance, I'd write a western, I'd write a vampire movie, I'd write a western vampire movie (which was really good, by the way). They were fun, but there was no comparison to sitting down at my computer and writing about my own experience.

When I started writing *Brigham City* I didn't know what this movie was about. All I had was a vague idea, and I started to put the characters together. But the story interested me. I was playing with it in my mind,

but I didn't know what this whole thing was all about until I got to the very last scene of the movie. Then I thought, "Have I been writing about the Atonement this whole time?" I had similar experiences writing about missionaries. As they bore their testimonies, they spoke directly from my heart.

This discovery is a wonderful experience. I highly recommend it. Write or paint, and absolutely forget about the marketplace. You are not Burger King. You are not trying to fill somebody's order. You are just there to take yourself a little bit closer to God. Once you are there, it is your job as an artist is to go back and tell people what you have learned. To me the artistic process and my spiritual progress are so intertwined that I don't know how I could progress spiritually if I weren't writing, if I weren't trying to force something into being. It is through that process that I learn. I learned so much about the Atonement, about forgiveness, about life, writing *Brigham City*. I reinforced my beliefs in writing, making and exhibiting *God's Army*, beliefs that wouldn't be as solid otherwise. As Latter-day Saints, we need to embrace the arts: writing, painting, sculpting, all of the creative arts. We must truly embrace them, not only as entertainment but also as tools for our own spiritual progression. We have to take the arts and fulfill the measure of their creation. That is our stewardship.

Now, brothers and sisters, I have an idea that, if we don't mess up this little Mormon film industry, we are going to see absolutely amazing things. In your work, if you write or paint, do the things that you are placed on this earth to do. As a Mormon artist you can do something that non-Mormons can't do, even what other Mormons can't do. Each person has a voice dramatically different from other voices within this community. We must stop imitating people in the world and start owning our own heritage, owning our own doctrine, start believing our own testimonies, and start sharing them with other people through the extremely effective medium of art.

Before I finish, I want to return to the development of Mormon filmmaking. I have a great fear that the momentum is going to die away, that Mormon filmmaking will follow in the steps of Mormon musical theatre, which once had a great, bright explosion, and then we messed it up; we killed it.

Now we have another chance, this time with filmmaking. We have a bright moment here, but if we become salesmen instead of artists, we are going to kill it and the opportunities will be gone.

I believe very passionately in "spiritual filmmaking." I promise you that I will continue to do so. With the movies I make, I will try so hard to bring you something good. I'll try hard to get close to our Heavenly Father. I'll try to find something you should know and bring it to you through

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film. I want the other artists out there to do the same, because I see our potential. Not as a business, but as a culture. By the time my children are my age, I want them to have an artistic culture and heritage that they can be proud of—one that is not about the artists and their egos, about the businessmen and their money, but one that is about our faith.

I truly believe that if we are exercising our divine creative powers, if our intentions are pure, it doesn't matter if we are building a temple in the desert, and it doesn't matter if no one outside our community ever sees our work. We are doing it for our Heavenly Father, we are growing closer to Him, and we are growing closer to each other.

Our movies, our books, our paintings, our music, and our sculptures will be great offerings to God and great blessings to our people. That is my message.



#### QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION WITH RICHARD DUTCHER

Brother Dutcher: Okay now we can really get going!

Q: What have you learned about Joseph Smith, while working on the screenplay about his life?

A: One of the reasons I wanted to do this film is because I've had a life-long interest in Joseph Smith. Anytime I see a book or article about him, I try to grab it and read it. For those of you who saw *God's Army*, in the scene where the black elder gives his testimony about Carthage Jail, that was my experience. From a very early age my testimony of Christ was quite frankly based on my testimony of Joseph Smith. It was through my testimony of Mormonism that I eventually gained a testimony of Christ.

When writing, getting down to the nitty-gritty of history and storytelling, you really get an education because you try to be historically accurate, to portray him honestly and to capture his personality. I'm so grateful for the experience and the process—things that I would have never understood if I hadn't gone through this. I've learned about Joseph Smith's life, but also I've learned a lot about filmmaking and human nature. And myself.

The project lost its funding last year with all the economic downturns that have happened. I am back at the stage of trying to convince people that a movie about the life of Joseph Smith is a good thing. Apparently it isn't as good as real estate at the moment, but...

Q: What makes an effective Mormon movie or a successful Mormon movie?

A: I think the trick to Mormon storytelling is honesty. Sincerity. Truthfulness. This is how you make a spiritual film that is not didactic. Consciously step away and say, “I’m not teaching. I’m not trying to convince anybody. I’m just telling things the way I see them.” You’ll be a more effective teacher by doing this.

I also have this possibly naïve idea that personal, powerful, spiritual films can be commercially successful. If we embrace what is uniquely ours, it may take a while to build an audience for it, but I think it will be there. If you do something well, if it is powerful, if it is beautiful, it is going to find an audience. Right now LDS filmmaking is developing a poor reputation; there is a lot of junk coming out. Some people say, “This is exactly what I thought Mormon filmmaking was going to be.” As a result, the audiences begin to dwindle. This is an important attitude to get past—“If it is Mormon then it must not be very intelligent; it must not be very well made.” I’m not talking about the outside world; this attitude comes from our own people. That’s a shame isn’t it? It should be the opposite. We should be the source where the world looks for depth and intelligence and spirituality, and we can be.

Someone once told me that one of the reasons we’ll never have good Mormon literature, films, or whatever, is because there is no such thing as Mormon tragedy. Everything turns out well eventually. I thought, “Are you out of your mind?!” I could give you a ton of Mormon tragedies. I just think we are very polite people and it may work to our detriment. A writer whom I really respect said that if you want to write honestly, your days in polite society are numbered. He’s right, and we need courageous LDS artists who are going to stop worrying about what the Relief Society president is going to think about this movie or this book, and just worry about if they are telling the truth and how the Lord feels about it. One morning I knelt down and, just for a little experiment, I asked, “Lord, I have a day. If there is one story you want me to tell, what would it be?” And you’d be surprised at the story the Lord wants me to tell! You may be really mad at me some day when I make it.

As Mormon artists and storytellers, we need to stop listening to what other people say we should do. We should look right to the scriptures. Our Father in Heaven is the ultimate storyteller. He has shown us how to do it. He has shown us what’s appropriate to do and what’s not appropriate to do. We must stop listening to the vocal minority who is so eager to tell us what is acceptable and start looking to the scriptures. We hold our storytellers to a much stricter standard than the Lord held his storytellers, the prophets, to.

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Q. Do other Mormon filmmakers think like you do? If they don't, which is evident because they are putting out stuff that isn't very great, how do you counteract this influence? Are they going to ruin it for the good Mormon filmmakers?

A. You speak to my heart. No, I'm not very popular with the other filmmakers because. ... Let me make one thing really clear. I have a certain view of what I think Mormon filmmaking should be. And I recognize that it's my view. I feel like the Spirit is right here backing me up, yet I recognize that this is my voice, one voice. I'm not going to be the sole voice of Mormon filmmaking. Mormon filmmaking belongs to any Mormon who wants to pick up a camera and wants his or her voice to be heard. And the audience has the right to accept that or reject that.

I experience a lot of anxiety about what I see happening because I am trying to build something and do something in a certain way that's vital for my spiritual and artistic progression. I worry about someone stepping in and wrecking it. I worry that Mormon filmmaking is going to be like Mormon theater was. It had this great start, which should have been the beginning of something great. That was about 30 years ago, when *Saturday's Warrior* came out. It was entertaining, it was good, but it was the first step forward. We never took the second, the third, the eight hundredth step. It was like *Saturday's Warrior* drew a huge circle, and instead of saying, "Let's make that circle bigger; let's do more with it," people said, "I'm going to take a piece of that circle." I think one reason was the fear of what other people think—censoring ourselves. And the circle just shrank until now it is practically gone.

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I worry that will happen to Mormon filmmaking. I'm going to try to counteract it. One reason I wanted to make these films was that every time I went to a movie theater and there was some reference to a Mormon it was something negative, something stereotypical, which made us look stupid. The way Mormons were portrayed was always ... off. I found myself thinking, "I don't know any Mormons like that." I was so insulted by it.

This problem is not just in films made by non-Mormons. When I came out of *Singles Ward*, I was depressed. I was discouraged as much as when I came out of one of the Hollywood movies that had made us look superficial, dumb, or narrow minded. This is so disappointing. We finally get a chance to tell the world what we're like, and we're dishing up the same shameful stereotypes and reinforcing them. I feel like black filmmakers must feel every time someone portrays an African American eating watermelon and fried chicken.

Having said that, let me emphasize that we must be able to talk about the work without attacking the people. As much as I dislike some of their films, I like these filmmakers. Please separate our discussions of the film from the filmmakers as individuals. We need to do that in our community.

Q. Do you think the Church hierarchy is going to step in and say, “Maybe you should hold off on the types of movies you make?”

A. I don’t think so. President Kimball, in a talk published in the 1977 *Ensign*, says quite the opposite. He gave us the mandate saying we have an opportunity, we have great doctrine, great history, great stories, and we should be sharing this with the world.

It’s interesting, though. When I made *God’s Army*, some Latter-day Saints asked me, “What right do you have to tell this story?” My response? This is my story; I lived this. These are things that happened to me. Who can tell me I can’t tell my story? I should. I must. The Lord told me to do it. The Church, to my knowledge, has never stepped in and made statements on artistic works. They have set restrictions, and I think this is very healthy. You can’t hold a big play in a chapel and charge people. You can’t use the Church as a marketing tool. You have to be very careful how you contact people. Sometimes those lines are crossed, and you have to pull back a little bit.

When *God’s Army* first opened, we would hold preview screenings. We would pack a theatre, show the film, and then talk to people afterwards. I’d ask for questions and get the usual suspects: “How does the Church feel about this?” The first few times it stumped me. It felt like an inappropriate question for the setting, and I never knew how to answer the question. Then one day we were doing a showing in Salt Lake City. Before the screening somebody introduced me to Sister Ruby Haight, Elder David Haight’s wife, who was there to see the film. She’s wonderful. After the screening I started answering questions. Sure enough, somebody asked, “How does the Church feel about this movie?” I guess he didn’t know how he felt about it until he knew how the Church felt about it. Finally, I said, “Well, you’re the Church, how do you feel about it?” Somebody started clapping. I looked up in the corner, and it was Sister Haight and her friends who were clapping. I wondered if Church authorities get tired of us running to them to find out what “the Church” thinks about everything. With films, perhaps this is because LDS movies are relatively new. When Michael McLean puts out a new album, we don’t call up the First Presidency and ask, “Do you like this? Should we listen to this?” We’re more grown-up than that; we need to start being more grown-up anyway....

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Q. Do you ever question whether you should depict or not depict certain aspects of our religion?

A. This question came from the very beginning, when I was doing *God's Army*. I got to the scene with the blessing of the elder who goes into convulsions, and I thought, "Wow, should I show that?" Well, if I am making an honest film, I have to show these missionaries giving a priesthood blessing. Because that is what they would do. The next question is how do I film this scene? Do I present it as we normally do, where they place their hands on his head, the music swells, you don't hear what they're saying, and the next thing you know the guy's better? Or do I do something different here? Do I film as it would happen in real life? After a lot of consideration, I prayed about it. I prayed a lot about it. I didn't want to do anything that would offend the Lord. In fact, I was trying to do quite the opposite.

So I filmed that scene, and I knew that I was doing it in the right way. While I was making this decision, I came across a scripture that said it's through the ordinances of the gospel of the priesthood that the Spirit is made manifest (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:20). I thought, "Well, that's interesting. Isn't that what I'm trying to do? To bring the Spirit into the movie theater?" I've heard a lot of people say, regarding my film, it's the first time they have ever been in a movie theater and felt the Spirit. So the scene worked and the scripture is right.

I also know the priesthood handbook says you don't videotape or film ordinances. And sure, that's right. You can't be blessing your son with Grandpa John's video camera over your shoulder because that destroys the Spirit. However, that's a real ordinance. In a movie it's not a real ordinance. Most of the actors aren't Mormon. So are you chasing away the Spirit? No, you're not. In fact, if anything you're inviting the Spirit into it. We're talking about two different things: movies and real life.

I think it would be phony and cowardly not to present our religion accurately. What ticks me off is when Mormon storytellers or filmmakers start to pull all of the Mormonism out of everything that makes us who we are. A good example of this is *The Other Side of Heaven*. A scene that just infuriates me is when they bring a child who has been hurt to the missionary for a priesthood blessing. In the book, if I remember correctly, the missionary takes him to the branch president, they give him a priesthood blessing, and the child recovers. So what ends up happening in the movie? There's no blessing. The missionary puts the kid on the floor and does some "air in, air out" business. What is that all about?

Why would you not show this wonderful thing that we have? Why do we have this candle that's burning brightly and, as soon as a

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nonmember comes in, cover it up? Is it because we don't want them to think that we're any different than they are? In that case, what do we have to offer them? If we want to look just like Methodists, or Lutherans, or Baptists, then what's the point? That's not very effective missionary work. We need to get out there and let people know what we have. In *Brigham City* I could not have told that story, the story that I wanted to tell, without showing a sacrament service. The whole movie was a Christ-centered movie, and I couldn't have done it without that scene. Nobody can see this film and walk away from it saying, "You know what? Mormon's aren't Christians." They know that at least one Mormon, the guy who made this film, is Christian, deeply Christian. They know that we believe in Christ.

You know, the Lord has made it very clear what we show and what we don't show, what we tell and what we don't tell. We make covenants regarding that. However, outside of our chapels, the sign says, "Visitors welcome." As a missionary I spent two years trying to drag people in to show them a sacrament meeting. I put it in a movie theatre and charge them \$7 and they go see it. I want them to see what our baptisms are like. I want them to hear people invoke the name of Christ and the Holy Ghost. But I'll never show them something that I've told the Lord I won't show them. I think it's very clear. We have to trust ourselves, and we have to have a relationship with the Lord, more than with the community around us.

Q. How do you resolve the conflict of telling things as you see them and not compromising your own standards? In real life scenarios people use language that is inappropriate. People are really doing it, so when you portray this in films as real life, is that compromising your standards?

A. I think it must be decided on a case-by-case scenario. I've found that once I got away from writing scripts for the marketplace and started writing scripts from my own experience, it became less of an issue. You have to be very careful as a creator in any sense because what you're doing is creating a world. I see the movie screen as a seer-stone into other people's experiences and their minds and hearts. In watching a movie, you become a witness to other people's experiences. When we witness all these things—rapes, murders, nudity—it does affect us. Therefore, as an artist you have a tremendous responsibility because you create this world that other people are going to pass through. You have to know what the purpose of this fictional world is and whether it's worth taking people through. Are they going to be better when they come out than they were when they went in? This question is more important than debating the use of a particular word or whether

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to show a certain body part. I think we must look at the whole film and not just its pieces.

I think this is one place that Mormon filmmaking went astray. We started to judge our movies by what is not in them rather than by what is. We started to say that if a movie doesn't have swearing, or nudity, or violence, it's a good movie. I think we know by now this is not true. A lot of businessmen have tried to pawn off this family film idea that as long as it doesn't have "objectionable elements," then it's a good movie for you to see. That's garbage. I'm less concerned about the language—the dirty words, whatever—than I am about the themes, the characters, the thoughts that are being communicated.

Again, it's a case-by-case scenario. When I'm writing, I don't censor myself. When I'm writing my dialogue, I just let whatever comes out come out. But then I go back and say, "I don't really need that. I can say that just as well by doing this." It's only the words or situations that I feel are important to the story that I allow to stay in.

I do think it's a cop-out when writers say they include things because that's the way things are. You wouldn't take your son into a whorehouse just because that's the way things are. But that's exactly what our filmmakers do. Also, at the same time, if you write something, defend it. I know this LDS writer who wrote a scene in one of her books where this teenage girl was looking at herself, naked, in the mirror. The scene is beautiful and appropriate and character driven; there was nothing arousing or pornographic about it at all. This writer got a lot of flack about the scene, and she apologized, which saddened me and made me angry. Defend your work; own it. Your writing is between you and the Lord. Make the right decision and then stick with it. There are no "rules." Sometimes you go one way; sometimes you go the other way. Be a grownup and take responsibility.

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Q. You talked earlier about how some of the actors in *God's Army* weren't members of the Church. It's such a spiritual movie, and they did such a good job portraying that. How did you help them understand what they were doing?

A. It wasn't hard. It was hard trying to get the Mormons to act like Mormons. I initially auditioned actors at BYU because I thought that would be where I'd find all my actors, all these returned missionary actors. But when Mormons pretended to be missionaries, they couldn't do it. I think it was because they had this idea in their head that they were no longer human. When I went to Los Angeles and held auditions, actors would come in and I would say, "Don't play this like what you think a priest or a religious person would be like. This is just you. Play it like you, in this situation."

I filmed *God's Army* with a 90 percent non-Mormon cast and crew in Los Angeles and shot *Brigham City* with a 90 percent Mormon cast in Utah. *Brigham City* was with money, by the way, and the other was without. It was a more spiritual experience to shoot *God's Army* in Los Angeles because the cast was so open: they were listening and they weren't judging the material. I had people quit *Brigham City* because they thought I was making an evil movie. It made me wonder if maybe I should ship in non-Mormon actors and crew members.

Q. What is your view on movie ratings?

A. If all cinema is to you is a way to pass time, if it's just pure entertainment, then stick to your ratings and you'll be happy all your life. I don't decide which films I'll see by the rating. I judge them by what they're about, what's in them, and who made them. Some filmmakers I steer clear of; I don't care what rating their movie has. I know the messages they want to put in my brain, and I don't want any of it. I know people who go to the multiplex, and whatever is PG, that's the one they'll go to. I think this is not the spirit of the thirteenth Article of Faith. We need to be seeking out the good, the praiseworthy, the virtuous, etc. We need to be producing it.

Q. How do films produced by the Church contrast with your concept of Mormon filmmaking?

A. I think that Church films are extremely effective, but they're propaganda. I say that in a good way. Propaganda is not always a bad thing. Church films are meant to introduce the gospel to people in a positive way. Or they are meant to instruct us in how to build the kingdom in some way. They're extremely effective and often extremely good, but they're a different animal than narrative filmmaking or feature filmmaking. I think that we get confused. The artists in our community sometimes get upset with the Church because they want instructional films to be more artistic, and some of the Church guys get upset with the artists because they want their art to be more instructional. We need to learn that they have separate purposes. The people you are going to reach with Church films and the people you are going to reach with feature films in the marketplace are different. It doesn't matter how you reach them; just reach them somehow. If we find another way of making films that will reach other people, we should do that too.

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Q. You stated in the forum that if we have a story, we should share it with others. How do we go about that? How do you start an independent company to bring this message to people?

A. You just have to do it. There are two parts. One is just the creation of the story, and in some way, if it never goes beyond that, it's still very beneficial. It still takes you places spiritually. I've written several film scripts that I haven't been able to make yet because I don't have the financing. Yet I've learned things through the writing process. If they never get made, that'll be a disappointment, but at the same time I've benefited from writing them.

The other part of that is getting them out to people. You just have to do it. With *God's Army*, if I'd taken it to anybody and said, "Hey, will you distribute it?" nobody would have done it. You just have to find a way to do it. There's no reason you can't. I hear novelists saying there's no market for their work. Well, make a market for it. Write the book. Put your whole heart and soul into it, and if people won't publish it, then publish it yourself and get it out there.

Often people won't give you information about distributing your work. I went to film distributors and said, "How do I do this?" And they didn't want to tell me anything. I had to figure it out on my own, and you can too. Excel Entertainment, which is the major LDS film distributor, is right up there now with Fine Line and Sony Picture Classics as far as success in the industry. This is an LDS company doing purely LDS films. Publishers don't have to rely on Deseret Book. Just do it right from your heart; and once it's done, you can find a way to get it out there.