History Written in Celluloid

Randy Astle. *Mormon Cinema: Origins to 1952.* New York: Mormon Arts Center, 2018. 680 pp. Paper: $19.95. ISBN: 978-0692137093.

Reviewed by Davey Morrison

In March of 1895, in Paris, Auguste and Louis Lumière screened ten short, single-shot films for an audience of two hundred, and the movies were born. Less than ten months later, after years of petitioning, Utah officially entered the union as the forty-fifth state in the United States of America. Within a year, the motion picture medium had begun and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had reached a significant turning point in its history, pivoting from isolationism toward integration into larger American society. Both the religion and the art form would spend the subsequent decades coming of age in tandem—sometimes cooperatively, other times antagonistically—and the fascinating relationship between the two is the subject of Randy Astle's comprehensive new history, *Mormon Cinema: Origins to 1952*.

Astle's book is indispensable to scholars of both Mormonism and film studies, an encyclopedic chronicling of stories, characters, and trivia related to Mormonism as it was depicted on-screen, whether by the institutional Church as it sought to utilize the new medium for propagandistic, proselytizing, entrenchment, and historical purposes, or by non-Mormons as Hollywood turned to Mormons for both heroes and villains and traveled to Utah for its breathtaking vistas, made famous in the westerns of John Ford and others.

The story begins at the dawn of the century, when Mormonism was a go-to boogeyman for early silent melodrama. Film was just beginning to find its footing as a narrative medium right as Mormonism was coming to prominent (and nefarious) national attention. In the

wake of the Smoot hearings—in which Senator Reed Smoot's eligibility for elected office was called into question by his leadership position as an apostle in a church long associated with and still practicing (albeit underground) polygamy—Mormons had become a villain *du jour* not only in the headlines but in all kinds of pulp fiction, from Zane Grey's western *Riders of the Purple Sage* to Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (both adapted for the screen multiple times in the early decades of film). This led to a string of screen melodramas—including, notably, *A Mormon Maid* in America and *Trapped by the Mormons* in England—capitalizing on both Mormonism's prominence in the headlines and its most sensational elements and featuring Mormon missionaries or pioneers kidnapping women to be plural brides, mysterious rituals with unusual robes, Danites seeking blood atonement, or all of the above.

Church leaders responded—not only with missionaries at the doors of film screenings, offering cash rewards for any women found to be kidnapped by the Mormons, but also by making their own films, seeking to tell their own story on-screen. *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* marked the first institutionally sanctioned and approved attempt at putting the story of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and the early pioneers on-screen; it was also an early historical epic, among the first feature-length films produced anywhere, predating D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* by two years. Other projects included *The Life of Nephi*, a now-lost Book of Mormon feature, and *The Romance of Mormonism*, which might have marked the first sympathetic portrait of Mormon history from entirely non-Mormon filmmakers had its producer and director, William H. Harbeck, not booked a fateful trip on the Titanic before production had begun in earnest.

Astle's book is full of such stories, from the tragedy of the Clawson brothers, early documentarians and chroniclers of Mormon life and history who met a tragic end when their films went up in flames, killing one brother and sending the other into an early filmmaking retirement

from grief, to Judge Whitaker's early years as a Disney animator, which would go on to inform both the aesthetics and ideology implicit in Mormon film in every subsequent generation after he left animation to run the infant Brigham Young University Motion Picture Studio, to Philo T. Farnsworth's invention of the television.

Another chapter details the production and reception of *Corianton: A Story of Unholy Love*, a recently rediscovered Book of Mormon epic from 1931 based on the novel by B. H. Roberts and the play by Orestes U. Bean. The film, now restored and housed in BYU's Special Collections, mimics the style of early Cecil B. DeMille biblical dramas with a salacious emphasis on sex and violence (including some rather racy pre-Code[1] nudity) coupled with a conservative, Victorian attitude toward morality (the fallen woman must meet a tragic end in order to redeem herself, while the hero who has succumbed to her temptation is allowed to live on, a penitent man).

The larger narrative is one of a church and an artistic medium solidifying their place within twentieth-century America, as screen depictions of Mormonism shifted from the villains of the early silent period to the heroic, all-American victims of intolerance portrayed in Hollywood films like John Ford's *Wagon Master* and Henry Hathaway's *Brigham Young*, in which the Mormons serve as on-screen stand-ins for another persecuted religious minority at the time of its production

1. The Hays Code was a set of moral guidelines for Hollywood's self-censorship, implemented in 1934 and lasting until 1968. The Code not only imposed strict rules on all mainstream American film with regard to the use of profane language and indications (or in some cases even depictions) of sex, violence, and nudity, it also included a long list of other moral suggestions and criteria that had to be met in order for a film to see public release, including but not limited to forbidding any depiction of a man and woman (including husband and wife) sharing a bed, depictions of miscegenation, depictions of criminal characters in a sympathetic light, and depictions of bad deeds left unpunished by the film's end.

in 1940. Of the latter film, one on-set Mormon consultant who knew Brigham Young as a young man remarked, "When I watched Mr. Jagger pleading in a courtroom scene, I thought I was listening again to Brigham Young." The film was a critical success, and although some Mormons were upset by the depiction of Young doubting his faith and calling, LDS prophet Heber J. Grant publicly thanked producer Darryl F. Zanuck for the film, calling its premiere "one of the greatest days of [his] life." Dean Jagger would later convert to Mormonism himself (donating his papers, fittingly, to Brigham Young University), while studio head Zanuck, producer of such classics as *All About Eve* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, considered it the finest film he'd ever produced.

Ultimately, Mormonism would fade as source material for mainstream movies—a result, largely, of the Hays Code, which both discouraged Hollywood from targeting specific faiths for criticism while also rendering it difficult to depict Mormon history on-screen in any sympathetic light, as positive depictions of polygamy would violate the moral standards of the Code. This paradoxical situation paved the way for Mormons—including future Church president Gordon B. Hinckley—to develop their own film tradition, with the "home cinema" Astle describes produced exclusively by and for Mormons, using the medium of film and filmstrips for missionary work, for boosting morale and strengthening testimonies among the membership, and for documenting the lives of Mormons, whether it be through TV and radio transmissions of general conference or through simple, small actuality films of otherwise anonymous members and hobbyist filmmakers whose access to early consumer motion picture cameras turned their quiet domestic moments into pieces of history.

Astle writes with clarity, precision, and an understated compassion for the lives he chronicles. He has the obsessive curiosity and attention to detail of an avid historian—tracing Mormons' involvement in classic films from *The Gold Rush* to *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* to *His Girl*

Friday to *Willow*—coupled with a working filmmaker's appreciation for and understanding of film as both art and business. *Mormon Cinema: Origins to 1952* is, like the films it details, a gift, a blessing, and a historical treasure, one to be cherished and remembered.

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Latter-day Screens: Mormonism in Popular Culture

Brenda R. Weber. *Latter-day Screens: Gender, Sexuality, and Mediated Mormonism.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019. 384 pp. Paper: $29.95. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0486-8.

Reviewed by Conor Bruce Hilton

Latter-day Screens is a fascinating, compelling, and, at times, frustrating look at a wide range of Mormon-related media. This is largely due to the central conceit of the book—essentially working with Mormonism as a meme and analytic—which works brilliantly in some instances but feels limiting and artificially constrains the discussion in harmful, rather than productive, ways in others. Weber's background and expertise in gender and media studies shows throughout the book. She