

Award and the Outstanding Award from Phoenix's Human Resources Department, the Liberty Bell Award from the Maricopa County Bar Association for contributions to the advancement of law by a non-attorney, the Distinguished President's Award by Kiwanis International, and the Humanitarian Award by the Lewkowitz Lodge of the B'nai B'rith. Don and his wife, Dorothy, are parents of two children. His topic is entitled, "One Community's Reaction to The Godmakers."

## Does the Camera Lie?

### A Structural Analysis of *The Godmakers*

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Before we begin our discussion of the film, which is fifty-eight minutes long, we would like to show you ten minutes of clips we extracted to provide a sample of the film's style and content. Permission to use the clips and the film itself was provided by Ed Decker. They include:

1. The prologue: The opening scenes which show the tone and establish the narrative frame of the story, as we are introduced to the Church and meet Ed Decker and Richard Baer as they approach two Los Angeles attorneys to pursue a suit against the LDS Church.

2. An animation sequence which Decker and Baer show the attorneys to illustrate "the difference between Mormons and Christians."

3. A brief discussion of LDS temple garments and certain semantic "links" with satanism.

4. The closing segment of the film, which opens with Eugene Eliason reading the suicide note left by his sixteen-year-old son Kip (he had appeared in an earlier sequence with a photo of Kip) and ends with a subjective shot of two young men dressed as Mormon missionaries approaching the viewer's door.

[The clips were shown at this point.]

Does the camera lie? Of course it does. If you doubt it, look at the photo on your driver's license or passport. You certainly don't look like that representation of yourself. Moving pictures can also lie. For example, we can show that people are having a wonderful time at this session by focusing on happy, delighted faces or the reverse by showing angry people yelling and stamping their feet. The camera can deceive by what it excludes, how the footage it records is arranged, how sound is added to image, how images are lit, or the angle the camera is aimed from. And don't forget sound. We are not dealing simply with images in a movie but a combination of image and sound.

Well, then, if the camera *can* lie, does it here?

What is *The Godmakers*? Ed Decker says work on it began in 1979. Credits at the end include copyright material from *Conspiracy Cults* and *Journey to Kolob* as early as 1980. It was released in its present fifty-eight minute version in January 1983. A shorter film, *Temple of the Godmakers*

which includes the depiction of the temple ceremony used in this film and some outtakes, is also in release.

Decker calls it "a straightforward documentary critical of the Mormon religion" (*Provo Herald*, 10 April 1983). In the *Seattle Times* (8 April 1983), Decker is quoted as saying, "The actual lies that the Mormons are fed are things we deal with."

Decker told a *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter, 29 October 1983, "The movie is an impact film. It is meant to be an impact film . . . . Our ministry is to bring Jesus of Calvary to the Mormon people."

Posters and ads publicizing the film say: "This hard-hitting film unmasks the myth of Mormonism from family home evening through actual secret rituals." Other publicity is headlined: "This controversial film peels back the mask of lies to expose today's most respectable yet deceitful and fastest growing cult!" It adds, "Why do concerned pastors find this shocking exposé essential viewing for their congregations? Because 30,000 door-to-door Mormon missionaries lure over half their converts from Christian churches!" (*New Life Magazine*, Aug. 1983)

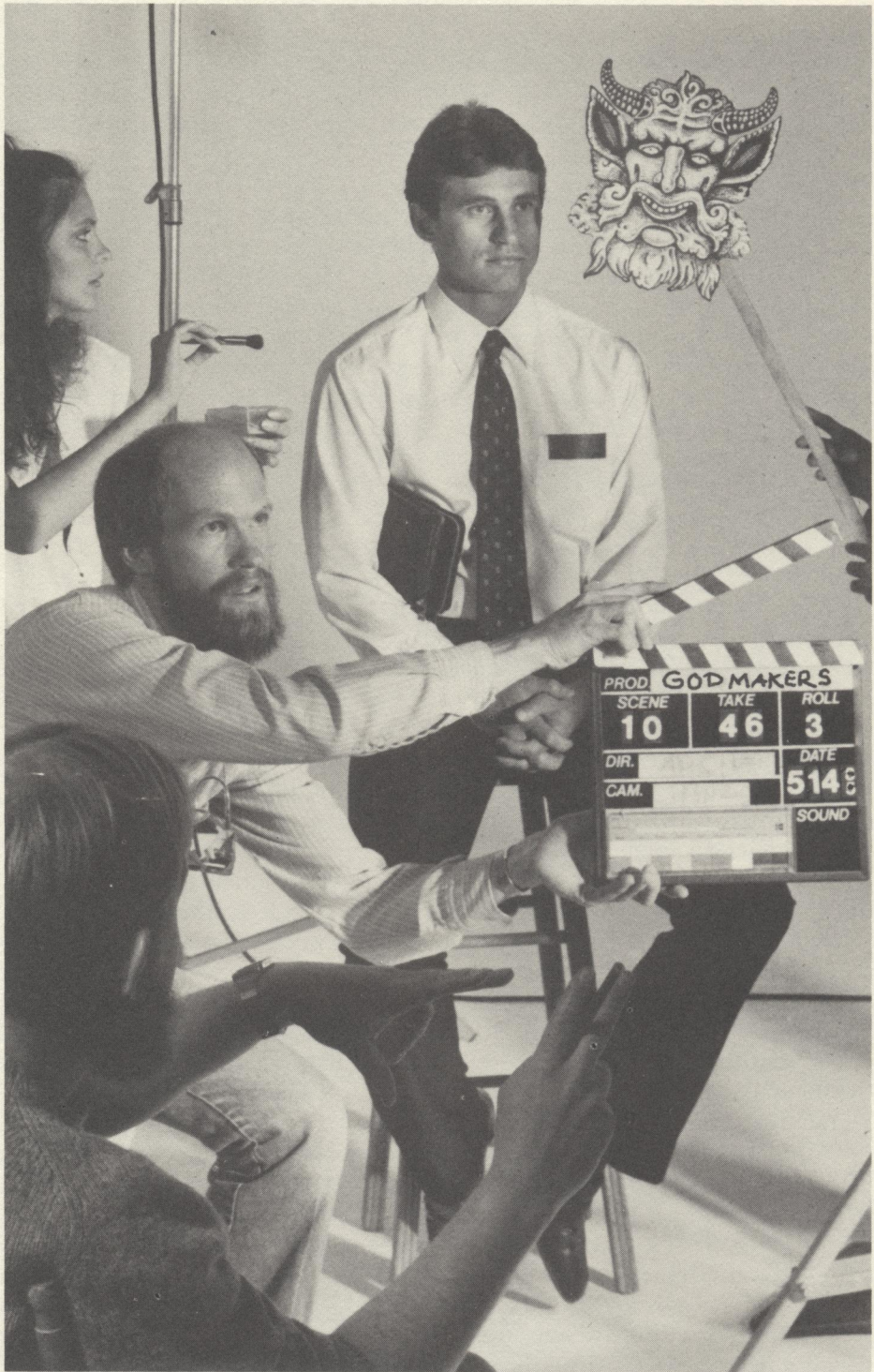
Is *The Godmakers* a documentary, an "impact film," a hard-hitting unmasking of myth, an exposé? Religious pornography? Propaganda? There is an obviously wide divergence of opinion.

I am looking at the film in terms of its structure, or the way its essential elements are arranged. The narrative structure of the film suggests it is a documentary, a celluloid collection of *documents* considered as evidence in a legal trial. These are documents, the film suggests, that are real, factual, actual, and available for examination. Film documentaries have existed as long as the cinema itself. There is a noble tradition of *cinema vérité* — or "film truth" — which attempts to record reality as it is, unvarnished. This film-making approach assumes, of course, that we can know reality as it is and agree on it — have a consensus among us.

Is this film an effort to objectively present information so the viewer can learn what Mormonism is and decide how he/she feels about it, or does it provide a specific view of Mormonism which it hopes to persuade viewers to accept?

Any film *structures* meaning in a variety of ways, and my basic critical assumption is that the important determination of what *The Godmakers* means arises from the interaction of the film and the viewer, not from statements of the filmmaker or any critic. How does *The Godmakers* use the elements of the film to *structure* a response? What is that response?

All films — fictional or documentary — are composed of certain elements. These include: (1) the narrative or "story" or plot; the thesis; what happens when to whom over time? (2) the characters, actors, "real people" to whom the action occurs; (3) camera movement and placement; (4) editing: the juxtaposition of images or the way things are put together; (5) sound, which can include voice-over narration, dialogue, music, and special effects; (6) the sets or natural settings which create the "ambience" of a film; (7) lighting which may be totally natural in a documentary, filtered, optically treated, or



angled for a specific reason. (For example, you've probably held a flashlight under your chin to scare someone. That's the basic "Frankenstein" lighting that makes even the most beautiful face appear monstrous. Backlighting, or lighting from behind, can make you look angelic. I always like that kind of lighting; it adds a certain credibility and frailty I otherwise lack.)

The narrative style of *The Godmakers* is ostensibly linear. The action occurs in "real time" (that is, time on and off-screen are presumed to be identical, with no artful ellipses), within an office of two attorneys in Los Angeles. Within this "reality," the film's narration moves fluidly through time and space. A brief animation sequence is projected in the law office (a projector propitiously being present) but interviews with a multitude of people in a wide variety of locations are not explained. We do not know where we are. We are not introduced to the person being interviewed. We do not know who is the interviewer. One of the two central characters, Ed Decker, suddenly speaks to the camera without the jacket he has worn throughout the film, seated in a comfortable chair near a desk in what appears to be his home. No explanation for the transition is made. We, with the camera, move inside and outside of various homes and offices (including an LDS visitors' center), to Hawaii, Great Britain, Seattle, Salt Lake City, and historic Cove Fort, Utah, where one memorable interview occurs beneath a stuffed buffalo head with the interviewee in pioneer costume. No comment or explanation of the voyages is made: we simply move through time and space. And in the course of the film, we accept this convention without protesting. Film time and real time *seem* identical. The only comparable experience I can recall is the Mormon Miracle Pageant where we move from the pre-existence to the Holy Land to nineteenth-century New York, then to pioneer Utah, culminating with flag-waving contemporary Boy Scouts.

We do not see the film through a single person's eyes, or point of view, although the controlling consciousness is clearly that of Decker and Baer. The deep, portentous tones of the narrator suggest an authoritative, informed, even eternal, point of view. We don't know who he is or where the voice is coming from, but we know a great deal about his ability to make decisions based on the fervency and power of his voice.

The impact of the narrative form is relevant to the film's message. You, the viewer, are a judge of the evidence presented. And the implication of the structure is that you are reviewing testimony from witnesses on both sides of the "case." "Witnesses" speak directly to the camera (which is you) and no interviewer is visible or suggested, with one exception which will be discussed later. No cross-examination or clarification of evidence is possible in this pseudo-legal presentation, but the impact of a courtroom drama is suggested and maintained. The viewer is the judge and jury. The film's final scene suggests a course of action as well as an attitude for viewers to adopt.

At this point it may be appropriate to discuss briefly what the style of presentation evokes. No film functions in a vacuum. As T. S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," pointed out, each new literary or artistic work draws on and transforms the history of its form (1919, 380).

While the ostensible manner of the presentation is documentary in *The Godmakers*, it evokes several other very familiar “classics.” The first is Jack Webb’s “Dragnet.” The music and earnest, searching tone suggest Sergeant Joe Friday’s efforts to elicit “just the facts, ma’am.” The second is Rod Serling’s “Twilight Zone”: the narrator’s deep voice and the sci-fi music remind us of those bizarre, fascinating episodes.

The other tradition is that of a “Sixty-Minutes” style television news program, a rigorous, reportorial investigation of a matter clearly relevant to the public’s well-being, and — by implication — worthy of deeper study. It also evokes the “March of Time” and other kinds of newsreels we’re all too young to remember — and which I myself know only through archival footage. The other allusion is more sensitive. Some people have commented that watching the film is like watching pornography. Since I have no experience in this field — and no desire to acquire any — I will leave it to your own sensibility.

The action of the film within the trial framework and ostensibly neutral narration is the presentation of the “highly groomed” image of Mormonism and the horrifying reality that lies beneath the mask.

A very important element in any film is its human characters, those to whom the action happens. All the people in this film are presented as “real people,” although several are actually actors re-creating incidents. Quickly, the film includes, in roughly chronological order: an invisible narrator, a middle-aged man whose family is torn from him (I call this man the stevedore; he is portrayed by an actor); a bearded, artistic-looking professorial man who lost his family (an actor); Ed Decker; Dick Baer; two attorneys (I call one the Doubting Thomas — he is wearing a velvet jacket — and the other I call Mr. Silver Gray, a distinguished older man — both actors); Harold Goodman (identified in the film as a “BYU professor, former bishop, and present mission president”); Brian Grant (identified in the film as “director of public relations for the LDS Church in Great Britain and Ireland”); an unnamed and wholesome-looking middle-aged couple with southern accents I call Mr. and Mrs. Sport Shirt; various people waiting in line to see the Seattle Temple before its dedication who are being interviewed by a woman whose voice is heard but who never appears on-camera; the never seen narrator; Floyd McElveen (identified in the film as “author of *The Mormon Illusion*”); Jolene and Craig (she, a pretty, wholesome blond and he, a chunky, healthy football player); an unidentified teenage girl; a “pink daisy” lady in Hawaii; another woman with very short hair who is very lonely; Eugene Eliason, and his surviving son (both refer to their son/brother Kip, whose photo is shown); Thelma Geer, “author, lecturer, and great-granddaughter of convicted Mormon assassin, John D. Lee;” the separate narrator of the animation; “a family portrait,” (a sincere open-faced couple and their attractive children); a mature blonde woman; Ron Priddis, identified as “editor of the Mormon underground paper, *The Seventh East Press*”; Sandra Tanner, “author, lecturer, and one of the greatest living experts on Mormonism;” Charles Crane, “author, college professor, and expert on Mormon archaeology;” Richard Thales, “author, lecturer, and archaeologist;” and two unidentified young men dressed as Mormon missionaries.

Everyone addresses the camera directly, except for Decker, Baer, and the two attorneys. Everyone is seated, facing the camera or walking toward it.

The Mormons are wholesome and cheerful: Goodman is rosy-cheeked and cherubic; Grant almost leprechaunish; Priddis's countenance is almost archetypically open and honest.

But their very appearance becomes sinister when we learn of the terrible things they believe and do. Ultimately in the film, Mormons must be viewed as deluded or deceiving. Either they are unaware of the evil the Church commits or they are part of the mask covering corruption.

All the victims are wholesome, too. They look just like Mormons! They are all "real" people and speak simply, directly and spontaneously. They don't seem to be actors reading their lines; but few ordinary people present themselves so professionally. There are no stumblings, no "uh . . . uh . . . uh . . . 's" of ordinary people trying to collect their thoughts for the next sentence. Everyone in the film seems sincere and earnest, although the Mormons are obviously misguided.

The placement and movement of the camera is a very subtle but important element of filmmaking. In *cinema verité* the camera is often hand held, creating jerky, quick movements that enhance the sense of unmediated reality captured by the camera's unblinking eye. Here the camera is remarkably stable, stationary for virtually all of the interviewing. But when it does move, it is dramatic. The long pans up and down the Church Office Building are terrifying. It contributes to the sinister sense of something rotten behind the gleaming surface of the Church as well as its gleaming, modern headquarters. The nature of the camera movement becomes a structural device contributing to the film's thesis of an innocent exterior that conceals a corrupt interior.

The editing of *The Godmakers* is impressive. It is a style generally called "invisible." Shot is matched to shot so smoothly you are unaware any cut has been made. It is tight and fluid. The sequences flow on linked topics, words, or ideas, so that you have a sense of moving smoothly even though great leaps of time, space, and — to my mind — logic, are being made. The transitions are always gracefully made, never calling attention to themselves with moments of blackout or conceptual gaps. They always appear natural, reasonable, and necessary. This technique works to enhance the seeming logic of the presentation.

Normally in a journalistic interviewing situation, you have shots of the questioner and then a reverse shot of the interviewee answering. Or you have a shot from behind the interviewer that shows a partial profile or back of the head as he/she addresses the person answering the questions. Not here. No interviewer is ever seen or, with the exception of the woman interviewing people outside the Seattle Temple, ever heard. It's as if the speakers effortlessly respond to questions we don't even have to articulate. They know what we want to know. The danger is that we may not formulate the questions that are *not* answered. In fact, we may not even think of those questions.

At one point, three different people describe their obviously genuine pain caused by Church leaders' advice that they should divorce. At least two are

actors, the “stevedore” and the “bearded professor.” Their “testimonies” are intercut with comments from Grant (still in his original interview situation) on the Mormon respect for marriage and the family. Then we see again the sorrowful faces of those who genuinely and affectingly share their pain. The effect is to prove Grant a liar, but very smoothly. We have the impression that a witness for the defense has responded very inadequately to the charges made by prosecution witnesses. But in reality, he has never heard nor responded to the particulars that surround his answer in the film. In a trial, an attorney would ask, “How do you answer the charge?” But here the process is swift and unstated — and inaccurate and unfair. This is not a court room where witnesses present evidence and are cross-examined within a legal framework, but the impression is created that it *is*.

The film uses a wide range of sounds to accompany its images, including science fiction music (“the-alien-invaders-draw-near” subgenre—supernatural but hokey), minor chords, the sincere voices of witnesses, the smooth voices of Goodman and Grant (which begin to seem slick), and most notably, the special sound effect of the creaking door at the end of the film.

The traditional film term, “dialogue,” meaning lines created by a scriptwriter, seems a misnomer for the language of the film. It honestly appears to be people sharing what they feel and believe. All the interviewees’ lines sound real, unstudied, heartfelt, spontaneous. Only Goodman and Grant sound as if they are repeating lines said so often the meaning has been lost. And when the anonymous female interviewer asks a painfully clean-cut young man waiting outside the Seattle Temple, he responds, seemingly automatically, “We believe in God the Eternal Father and his son Jesus Christ. . . .” He speaks so mechanically it’s as if he has been brainwashed — more proof of this sinister cult’s mind-manipulation.

The narrator’s deep-pitched, sonorous voice is almost self-parodying. He intones the most incredible lines with the same authoritative voice we know we can trust from all those documentaries that fill Sunday afternoon.

The dialogue does include some instances of loaded language, for instance, “highly evolved humanoids,” “the Mormon Jesus,” “tithing extracted.” But in general the former Mormons speak in everyday, practical terms that make the religious terms of Mormon theology and the temple seem even more bizarre by contrast.

The sets of the film are “real,” natural, neutral. But like everything else, the very ordinariness becomes suspect. We feel that the normality is only surface. It’s like a cheerful village in a Hitchcock film just before the murder — a veneer, a mask, that conceals evil in the most sunny circumstance.

The lighting throughout is very naturalistic. This is, incidentally, hard to achieve. All the interviews with former Mormons take place in wholesome, well-lit houses — family rooms filled with light and green plants — or in sunny exteriors. There are no dark corners here. Even when Sandra Tanner is interviewed with a snowy scene outside her study window, the light is never harsh or sharp. The attorneys’ office in the last scene is darker than I remember ever seeing in “real life,” but it reflects the darkening mood of the film.

The exception to the lightness is remarkable. The final scene of the film shows the missionaries approaching *your* door, with the wedge of black moving across the screen and a curious light in their eyes. (All this, remember, is backed by the creaking door that you've heard hundreds of times before in Count Dracula's castle or Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory.)

Using my own responses as a geiger counter registering the peaks of emotional response, I conclude that *The Godmakers* presents the wholesome family image of the Church and then reveals the evil beneath it.

You can only conclude Mormons are brainwashed or corrupt. They are hypocrites who preach family togetherness and love but practice demonic rituals and punish any who deviate from a very rigid norm.

The final result, even if you are skeptical of the kind of *National Enquirer* mentality the film also evokes, is a suspicion of and distaste for all Mormons, and secondarily and unintentionally, the film leads viewers to distrust anyone who talks about Christianity and claims Jesus Christ. The film attempts to show Mormons who discovered Christianity and left the non-Christian church. But the approach generates a queasiness about all charismatic religious expression.

Finally and personally, the film is very well done despite some clumsy touches. After studying it carefully, I acquired a respect for the energy and skill of those who made it.

As a devout Mormon, I am irritated and disturbed by its illogic and anger. (Like much Mormon publicity and film, the film is sexist: all the major characters are male. The women — especially in the animation — are all blond, buxom clones.)

But what disturbs me most is not the depiction of sacred rituals, or misrepresentations of theology, or generalizing from limited evidence. It is the very real pain that I can sense in these people. And I know that the film uses the same kinds of appeal to emotion and poor logic we sometimes use to attract people in the Church.

I can discredit elements of the film, quarrel with the manipulateness of its presentation, but I am moved by the honest pain I know it shows.

One image from the film haunts me. It is the face of a woman. She is not strikingly beautiful or ugly. She sits alone — the camera in very tight on her. Like many others, she describes the transforming joy of discovering Jesus and leaving the Mormon Church. But more vivid than that change is the description of her pain. "I was alone as a child in the Church. I was alone as a wife. I was alone when I was divorced. Where is the love?" As I look at the reality of her pain, unshared by her sisters in the gospel until she articulates it for the camera, I know that here the camera does *not* lie.

#### REFERENCES

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