

after giving the question careful consideration, I felt that there was no better alternative to using the terms “Mormon thinkers/scholars” and “Christian thinkers/theologians” when speaking of the scholars as a group. Further, unless she or he self-identified otherwise, I employed that same basic designation when referring to the scholars individually. This approach is not intended to make any judgments or to implicitly offer an opinion on the matter one way or the other but is rather an attempt to accurately and adequately reflect the texts and conversations themselves.

Marrow: Richard Dutcher’s Mormon Films

Reviewed by Dallas Robbins

*He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow-bone.*

—W. B. Yeats, “A Prayer for Old Age”

In Richard Dutcher’s latest film *Falling*, a rich scene revealing the subtle conflict between the demands of commerce and artistic endeavor is focused around the word *marrow*. The protagonist, lapsed Mormon Eric Boyle, a suffering videographer and aspiring screenwriter, is failing to sell his latest story to a well-tanned and successful Hollywood producer. After rejecting Eric’s work, the producer complains to him that if he wants to make it in the film business, he needs to do something different, something new. It goes like this:

Producer: Last year somebody shows blood. This year you gotta show bone. Next year you gotta show inside the bones—whatever that shit’s called.

Eric [slight contempt in his eyes and a little exasperation in his voice]: Marrow.

Producer: Right, I don’t know what that shit is—I don’t know what it looks like—you gotta show it to me. . . . Something new, that’s all anyone wants to see. . . . You gotta push it further than anyone has pushed it before. . . . Show me some marrow.”¹

Unsettled by the encounter, Eric leaves, conflicted about sacrificing his artistic integrity to the poolside Hollywood gods. Not

ironically, the film that Eric happens to be in is an exact answer to the producer's request. While we watch Eric *fall* from any grace that he once possessed, he descends into a mélange of violence, both domestic and public, leaving little redemption at the end. Is it something new? That would be debatable. Is it something new in Mormon film? Absolutely.

Clearly the producer's "marrow" means one thing—more blood, more bucks. But to Eric, once an active Mormon, the term "marrow" would have a familiar ring from LDS rhetoric and revelations. As Eric contemplatively strolls across the Los Angeles Temple grounds, does the word "marrow" recall to his imagination the temple ritual language he once vowed to keep concealed? Does he remember the Word of Wisdom's promise that the obedient "shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones"? (D&C 89:18). In LDS thought, "marrow" carries a cultural weight that the producer's careless complaint misses; the richness of the idea of marrow makes the word echo beyond the film itself.

Marrow as the concealed territory of the blood's creation serves as a metaphor of genesis—the source for the Mormon promise of health and Hollywood's machine of shock and destruction, evoking ideas of divine blessing and redemption alongside the bloody precariousness of human mortality. Marrow, as a metaphor for the conjunction between sacred yearning and profane frailty, can serve as a useful conceit that provides an approach to the films of Richard Dutcher, where he explores Mormonism and the crux of life's messiness and grace's beauty, showing us something new.

God's Army, released in the spring of 2000, was a watershed moment in the creation of an LDS cinematic market. There had been films made by and for Mormons before, but they usually fell into categories of proselytizing videos, faith-promoting Church history films, straight-to-video family entertainment, or animated fare. But *God's Army* was different. It was explicitly Mormon and commercial at the same time. It was an unexpected but exciting surprise for Mormons to go see a movie about themselves on a Friday night, munching down overpriced popcorn, while *Gladiator* was playing in the theater next door. *God's Army* was a shift in how Mormons consumed entertainment, leading to an explosion in the LDS film market.

Aesthetically straightforward in its storytelling, the film had strong linear character development typical of a hero myth. The film was competent in the basics of film language and audience expectations, and served up the expected happy ending, with a voice-over narration comforting the audience with a sense that, “all is well in Zion.”

But the film’s narrative provided a way to explore the challenging aspects of missionary life while still celebrating what is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report” (Thirteenth Article of Faith). It approached the marrow of Mormon life, mixing the messiness with the sacred, unafraid to discomfit some viewers. In this story, the missionaries, usually lionized in Church media, were scaled down to human proportions and shown to be just as real as the people whom they teach. The story offered a spectrum of characters that reached toward actual experience and eschewed Church-correlated image. The film explored issues of regret, doubt, racism, abuse, and death, punctuated with practical jokes, missionary banter, slamming doors, fights, miracles, and revelation. This mixture of sacred and profane showed the marrow of missionary work, realistically explicating young men’s first encounter with the tension between mortality and divinity.

While “all was well” at the end of *God’s Army*, Dutcher’s next film was a little messier. *Brigham City* tells the story of a widowed bishop/sheriff in a small, sleepy Utah town who is thrown into a crisis, personal and public, as a series of murders come close to home. Marketed with the tag line “Nothing Attracts a Serpent like Paradise,” the film explored the fragile boundary Mormons put up to isolate themselves for fear of the outside world, unprepared for the fact that evil knows no such bounds.

The sheriff is led down a path of false starts and stops while the death toll begins to pile up. This tension is brought to a dramatic apex when the killer is discovered to be one of his own—his deputy. The emotional conflict of the climactic scene is a great moment of suspense, leaving the sheriff no other choice but to defend his life.

Amid the excellent moments in *Brigham City*, the story is occasionally interrupted by a mixed sense of style. Changing genres so drastically from *God’s Army* to *Brigham City* led Dutcher to rely on

suspense movie clichés such as red herrings, visual deception, and ominous music to lead the audiences' response, typical of Hollywood fare. Whether such directorial choices were intended as irony or not, these common tropes create, at times, a disjointed tone.

But as Dutcher moved into this realm of film violence, it is obvious that, when someone pulls a trigger, he intends it to be more than just entertaining satisfaction. The marrow of violence, which eventually finds ultimate expression in *Falling*, had its genesis in *Brigham City*.

Brigham City shows a significant turning point in the development of Dutcher's skill as a filmmaker. Primarily his penchant for climatic and visceral endings leaves behind the "all is well" voice-over in *God's Army*. After suffering over his decision to kill the enemy, the sheriff/bishop sits on the stand during sacrament, clearly distressed. He refuses to partake in the sacramental ordinance, thus revealing his personal feelings of unworthiness. Unsure what to do, the deacon passes the bread to others, but the congregation refuses the sacrament as an act of solidarity with the distraught bishop. The bread and water are truly seen as the powerful symbols which they actually represent: redemption. And the congregation will not participate in the act of redemption until they can bring along the person who needs it the most, the bishop.

The scene is an emotional tour de force, reaching toward peace and mixed with sorrowful regret. Without voice-over or dialogue to guide the audience along comfortably, the scene lets the audience experience the moment as part of the congregation. The device became a hallmark of Dutcher's personal style which was continued in his next two films. This technique allows the dramatic climax of the film to be experienced, without dialogue or narration, but only in simple visuals, music, and acting. This type of end attempts a form of sublimity, rather than mere movie-watching, in which the viewers are offered a cathartic moment to be experienced along with the characters, regardless of whether they are comforted or conflicted by it.

Dutcher's next project *States of Grace*, while similar to *God's Army* in setting, was a decided break from his previous work in skill, tone, and style. This film clearly establishes Dutcher as a skillful storyteller, choosing subtle visuals and characterization

over film-school clichés. Even the music by Ben Carson is well realized and perfectly applied to the narrative beats of the story.

Expanding beyond an exploration of missionary life, it is actually a multi-viewpoint film with a diverse focus. In addition to the missionaries, Elders Lozano and Farrell, several non-Mormon characters are given equal measure. Louis is a fallen preacher living homeless on the beach, hiding from his past sins. Carl is a gangster who is extricating his life from violence while attempting to keep his younger brother from making the same mistakes. And Holly, the missionaries' next-door neighbor, is an actress who lives with the regret of a porn film credit and struggles to bridge the resulting estrangement from her family. Not solely about Mormons, *States of Grace* expands the possible underpinnings of films that explore religious ideas for a broader audience, exhibiting an inclusive outlook. The film explores people's struggles with grace and the grim realities of a violent world, approaching yet again the mortal and divine in the metaphor of marrow. It pushes the story into the far-reaching influence that violence plays in the lives of ordinary people, anticipating the bloodfest of *Falling*.

It is revealed that Elder Lozano was a gang member in his past; and he is able to build trust with Carl, not at first because of a religious message, but because of the violent culture they have shared. The story offers the idea that our sins, as well as our redemption, can build the needed love in a violent world or destroy us completely.

This concept is evident in the juxtaposition of two visual narratives central to the film. When Carl is being confirmed a member by the laying on of hands, his younger brother is being murdered in a back alley by Carl's gangster enemies. The camera offers God's viewpoint, looking down at the newly confirmed member surrounded by elders, slowly fading to the scene of a dead youth surrounded by a gang of murderers. Even though the visual analogy is obvious, its power transcends the moment into a realm of thoughtful cinema—when someone dies, it means life for someone else—reminding the viewer of Christ's sacrifice.

This complicated mix of death and life becomes the final drama of the film. Elder Farrell is being sent home early because he spent the night with Holly. He now faces the austere justice of

his father who had told him, "I would rather you come home in a casket than have you come back dishonored." Filled with the fear of parental damnation, he locks himself in the bathroom and slits his wrists. The dire narrative of a missionary driven to attempted suicide is digging deep into the marrow of Mormon culture, providing a critique of the perfectionism that pervades LDS life by showing the violent end toward which such a graceless ethic of sin and punishment tends.

In contrast, the film's final scene suggests the possibilities of a merciful ethic, which extends the power of atonement to everyone, Mormon or otherwise. At the end all major characters witness a live Christmas manger display on a sunny California beach. A metaphor for grace, the innocent Christchild, is literally passed from one to another. The scene echoes the redemptive act of passing the sacrament in *Brigham City* but is not limited by the bounds of organized religion, having its effect outside obedience and ritual.

After *States of Grace*, Richard Dutcher invited controversy with his public remarks about the Mormon film market, provoking his fellow filmmakers with the advice: "Stop trying to make movies that you think General Authorities would like."² Even though Dutcher was distancing himself from the LDS film market (and the Church), he clearly wasn't finished mining Mormon culture and the marrow it holds. His statement seemed to be a preparation for what was coming next.

So while *States of Grace* is a complex affirmation of God's love, *Falling* is a tragedy about a world where love is absent and violence is commonplace. Marketed as the "first R-rated Mormon film," it seems like something that the General Authorities would not like, perhaps with good reason. It teems with blood, exploring violence and sexual dynamics that have never been portrayed in a Mormon film quite like this. Devoid of music, visually stark and gritty, the film is stripped down to the bare essentials, a Hollywood life without the special effects. The aesthetic of "virtuous, lovely, or of good report" is absent, even deliberately obliterated.

The raw opening scene sets the stage. Eric Boyle bursts into his house and screams "Noooooooo!" as he sees his wife's body hanging from the ceiling fan. He gets her down and holds her close, looks up at God, and repeats the perennial R-rated swear word as a prayer of pain. I've rarely seen such a no-holds-barred

hook; it will either fix you to the seat or repel you out of the theater. The film then takes the viewer back a few days, recounting the ill-advised choices that had led to that opening scene, then pushes forward to the extended bloody aftermath.

Eric is a lapsed Mormon who chases disaster in L.A., catching footage of blood and mayhem for the local news while, in his spare time, he tries to break into screenwriting. Davey, his wife, is an aspiring actress who forces herself through the casting couch culture, almost catching her big break, but thwarted by an unplanned pregnancy of unknown paternity. These two characters are stuck in their murky lives, just on the edge of "making it" but about to lose everything.

Eric, as only the chance of tragedy would have it, happens upon a fight and rolls camera, becoming the voyeur and purveyor of a murder. Eric is conflicted about his culpability but sells the footage for a few extra dollars. It is on the news later that day as he and all his friends watch, responding with a mixture of disgust and congratulations. On the same day, Davey gets the leading role in a movie, only after revealing her flesh to another sort of purveyor, along with the unsaid stipulation of sexual favors. These two choices lead the story down an inevitable path that reminds one of Greek tragedy, where escape is impossible, fate is certain, and grace is a ghost.

Eventually the story returns to the opening scene, propelling Eric down a path of revenge. In the very end, Eric is beaten, bloody, and broken, slowly stumbling down a city street, imagining himself before the Christus sculpture on the Los Angeles Temple grounds. The unresponsive, empty-eyed Christus is contrasted with the bloody, dying Eric. God is absent in *Falling*, leaving only the nostalgic memory of a God from an earlier life. While Eric is saturated in doubt, blood, and sin, the Christus is untouchable, unstained, and unmovable, as if drained of any redemptive blood. The metaphor of marrow loses its redemptive weight and meaning, remaining only a biological reminder of death. As seen previously, a Dutch ending would leave the audience with a hope amid certain complexities and challenges. But *Falling* takes us to an uncomfortable crescendo ending in death, both mortal and divine.

But what sets *Falling* apart from a typical Hollywood thriller is

that it is a serious attempt to face the challenging pervasiveness of violence: our consumption of it, our culpability in it, and how we propagate it. It is a provocative critique of how media uses and manipulates violence for high ratings and money. And that is what especially makes *Falling* difficult to watch. There is not one moment of violence that does not get to the marrow of our culpability in being part of a culture that praises nightly news blood-letting, cineplex bone-cracking, and our use of violence in responding to our relationships at home and beyond.

However, this depiction of violence leads to complexities. Does the visual narration of graphic material hurt or help the film? This is not to question the use of such material, but how far can a story go before it actually works against its own concern?

Let me offer an idea. Vincent Canby, the late critic for the *New York Times*, in his review of the Italian film *Salo* (1978) struggled with the nature of graphic visuals: “*Salo* is, I think, a perfect example of the kind of material that, theoretically, anyway, can be acceptable on paper but becomes so repugnant when visualized on the screen that it further dehumanizes the human spirit, which is supposed to be the artist’s concern. When one reads, one exercises all kinds of intellectual processes that are absent when one looks at pictures. . . . The words are not nonsensical, but they are feeble in conjunction with the ferocity and explicitness of the images.”³

By the end, the viewer may need a respite from the barrage of violence. The graphic material pummels the audience, working against tragedy’s ultimate purpose—a catharsis—leaving an empty sublimity with all terror and no wonder. In this respect, I think *Falling* falls short as a tragedy. Absent any narrative coda to let the audience catch their aesthetic breaths, the film seems to miss a full catharsis, the purging of emotion, which is essential to a successful tragedy. Rather, the emotional aftermath of the violence was stuck in my throat, leaving me with a haunted aftertaste.

While this effect does not detract from the film’s challenging and worthwhile ideas, it does make the story difficult to decipher, as noted by many critics. Ultimately *Falling* is a Rorschach test stained with marrow’s blood, where some people will find grace, while others will find none.

In the end, the films of Dutcher are unafraid to explore this marrow of experience, where meaning slips between sacred and

profane. From the personal conflicts and conversion in God's Army to the communal forgiveness in *Brigham City*, from crossing the ecumenical boundaries in *States of Grace* to the tragedy of no grace in *Falling*, Dutcher's films explore the meaning of redemption rarely expressed at the cineplex. I am curious where he will go next.

Notes

1. Richard Dutcher, writer and director, *Falling*, produced by George D. Smith (n.p.: Main Street Movie Co., 2008), transcription mine.

2. Richard Dutcher, "'Parting Words' on Mormon Movies," *Daily Herald* (Provo, Utah), April 12, 2007, <http://www.heraldextra.com/content/view/217694> (accessed December 23, 2008).

3. Vincent Canby, "Movie Review: Salo or the 120 Days in Sodom. Film Festival: 'Salo' Is Disturbing . . .," *New York Times*, October 1, 1977, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9904E7D8163AE334BC4953DFB667838C669EDE> (accessed December 23, 2008).