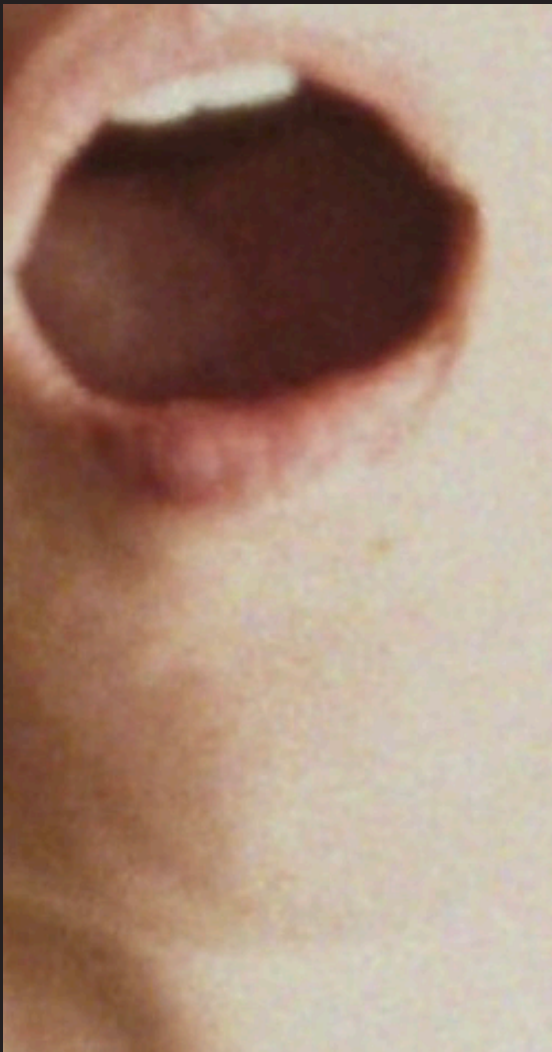




**THE
BODY**



**IS THE
MESSAGE:**

THE PROMISE OF
MORMON HORROR

BY MASON KAMANA ALLRED



BEWARE,

DEAR READER, FOR
TERRORS UNTOLD
AND SPOILERS MOST
RUINOUS LIE AHEAD



Heretic, Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, 2024, A24

THE BODY IS THE MESSAGE

THE PROMISE OF *MORMON* HORROR

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Mormonism understands the primacy of the body. But so does Horror. In fact, horror films don't just depict the body in pain, fear, or turmoil—they are pretty great at actively manipulating the viewer's bodily response. They aim for the body. Your heart races, your stomach turns, you jump in your seat, maybe even let out a scream. Some people love this effect; others avoid it altogether. But the best horror titles know, like Mormon doctrine does, that true understanding comes from feeling and experiencing. The body is sometimes the most potent medium for deep thought and cathartic release. In a twist on Marshall McLuhan's iconic phrase, the body *is* the message. At its best then, horror is about making you understand on a whole other level by making you first feel something.

*Beware, dear reader,
for terrors
untold and spoilers
most ruinous
lie ahead.*

That is why the recent wave of arthouse horror—from the likes of *Aster*, *Eggers*, *Peele*, *Ducourneau*, *Fargeat*, *Glazer*, etc.—has been so fascinating. The genre is shifting from relying on jump scares and hollow thrills to something just as experiential but with a new depth of style and thought, conveyed more through undertone and atmosphere. A kind of vibes over violence. It's an evolution in horror cinema that aligns strangely well with the broader decline of organized religion and the simultaneous rise of alternative spirituality and mental health awareness. Horror has always been a generic means of dealing with the ineffable but now it seems more intentional, even more effective at getting at contemporary social issues—"horror verité," as Alison Landsberg calls it.¹



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Yet, when it comes to religion on screen, Catholicism still dominates horror iconography. It's not even close. Possessions, rituals, exorcisms, cathedrals, ornate vestments; it's all so photogenic. I mean, it even has a formalized system for dealing with demons, not to mention the deep sense of guilt around sin. It's not a competition, but what about Mormonism? What distinct aesthetics and anxieties might it bring to the table?²

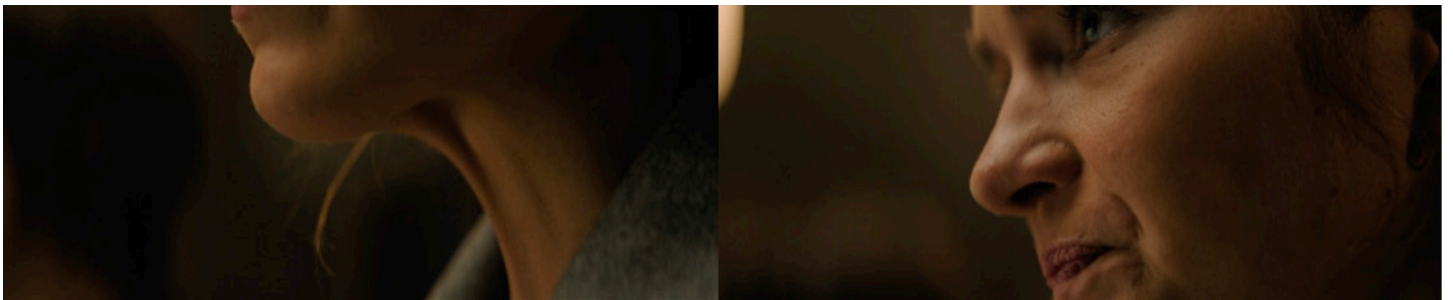
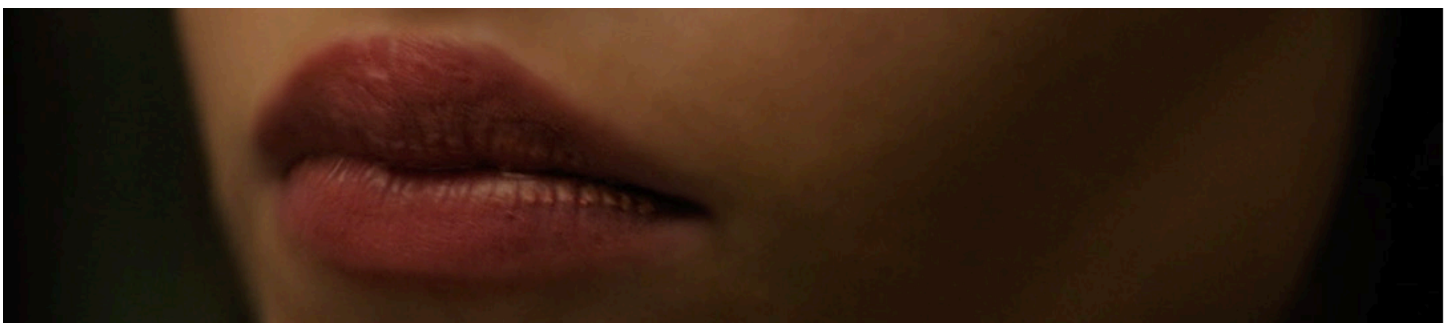
One recent answer: the existential fear of being misled.

FRAMING A **FAITH CRISIS** IN *HERETIC*

Latter-day Saint belief can feel like a total life commitment with the potential to fixate on exact,

maybe even blind obedience. Non-Mormon directors Scott Beck and Bryan Woods injected some of this in their A24 release *Heretic* (2024). That film dished it up as sister missionaries misled into a deathly home, but even more powerfully as the real threat of losing your faith—potentially having been misled in your own religious convictions. Yikes! That is perhaps the film's most impressive quality: the power with which it captures the lived experience of many Saints going online and encountering difficult or hostile material about their religion in the last couple decades.³ They have felt scared, lost, even bullied into disbelief. Were they misled their whole lives? Or is the deluge of digital media antagonistic to their faith the deception? What a potent and timely dilemma for Mormon horror, especially when packaged in a smart and fun way.

In *Heretic*, Hugh Grant's character of Mr. Reed entices Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes to enter his home by nonchalantly assuring them his wife is in the kitchen baking a pie. Soon they learn he's not interested in learning about Mormonism. He knows more than



Heretic, Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, 2024, A24

they do. Oh, and no one's in the kitchen. The pie scent is coming from a candle. This guy has a completely different, more menacing agenda: he's going to teach them a lesson about control.

At the onset of Mr. Reed's atheist onslaught, he warns the Sisters that what he is about to present won't be comfortable, "It will make your stomachs sink a little and your hearts beat faster. It will make you sick." Here, Mr. Reed begins to embody the devastating deluge of "evidence" against belief in the church found online that results for many in an existential faith crisis. Cutting between close ups of Mr. Reed explaining and extreme close-ups of the Sisters' faces trembling, gulping, and wincing visualizes this traumatic experience. The film lets you know the heady arguments to come are meant to be felt in the body.

In terms of blocking, Mr. Reed literally takes the Sisters from the living room (a more homey and neutral site of missionary power and presentation) into his library. They're brought from parlor comfort to intellectual leveraging of tomes, board games, and projected arguments in the study. But ultimately, the intellectual debate (thoughts) will be fatally felt in the basement (guts). *Heretic* turns the Mormon-specific faith crisis into delicious horror for a wide audience. But it works both ways. For those who know this gut-wrenching doubt, they feel seen. For those outside or without faith it's enjoyable in a proxy sadistic way. (Let's just see how those pesky naïve missionaries respond when we finally corner them and give 'em the full Reddit treatment). But no matter how you watch it—and the reception is as fun as the film—*Heretic* works because it builds Mormon characters and talk of the religion in informed and respectful ways, where anyone can relate to Sister Barnes and Sister Paxton. Anyone can enjoy caring about their potential deception and fate.

And in the well-worn tradition of pathos and misogyny, the sisters evoke heaps of emotions from the audience. They pull on our heartstrings. *Heretic* follows Alfred Hitchcock's tendency to cinematically needle women. Hitchcock famously said (quoting the playwright Victorien Sardou), "'torture the women!' The trouble today is we don't torture women enough."⁴ *Heretic* understood the assignment. But it's also nice to consider Sister Paxton—sparring with Mr. Reed to the very end and winning the audience's respect—as a version of Carol Clover's more nuanced suggestion of the "final girl" trope.⁵

EXACTING OBEDIENCE IN *THE HANDBOOK*

In Latter-day Saint filmmakers Brandon and Hannah Carraway's short film, *The Handbook* (2023), which was possibly even the inspiration for *Heretic*, Elder Weber and Elder Hafen are tricked into an older woman's home only to realize she has been targeting and trapping Latter-day Saint missionaries for some time. In a shocking reveal, we see a bookshelf full of name badges and clothes she's collected as trophies.

These Elders already struggle with obeying the missionary handbook which, as it turns out, can be lethal when encountering devious murderers. Cuts between shots of the handbook with specific rules highlighted and their difficulty in uniting in "exact obedience" pop up throughout the short. The clearly "rebellious" Elder Hafen's disobedience even leads to his captivity, after he



The Handbook, Brandon Carraway, 2023, Black Rabbit Monolith



The Handbook, Brandon Carraway, 2023, Black Rabbit Monolith

excuses himself to the restroom, leaving his companion alone with the strange woman in the living room.

An ominous industrial buzzing sound creates suspense, only softened with silence, electronic scoring, or even organ music at times. The look of *The Handbook* is also great. It's super grainy and has an almost retro feel. It makes you feel uneasy, but at the same time you don't want to look away. But you do feel something is off as Elder Weber converses alone with the woman in her large front room, which looks like a domestic version of the lobby in the hotel from *The Shining* (1980). In fact, just as that terrifying Kubrick film opens with establishing shots of a long winding county road, so too does *The Handbook*, suggesting an isolating journey into grave danger already experienced by others before.

Instead of using a normal shot/reverse shot, the conversation between Elder Weber and the woman is formally unbalanced. The rule of thirds is subverted with more negative space behind them rather than in front of their gaze, making them feel too close to each other for comfort. The eyeline match is eerily off too. Low angle shots of the creepy woman are stitched together with high angle shots of the nervous Elder, alone, scared, *trapped* by social propriety and crafty editing.

Soon Weber gets out of the conversation to go look for his companion only to find him in the basement in his garments, literally trapped, in a cage with another tied-up victim being disemboweled.

As many of us would, Weber books it. He runs out only to be nearly hacked in two by the old woman, now with a machete. Luckily, he raises the Book of Mormon just in time, which stops the blade halfway through. Scripture saves his life. He then bolts out of the house into an open meadow. But after reflecting on the

handbook rule to “always stay with your companion,” the surviving Elder Weber—in an act of exact and truly *exacting* obedience—turns back toward the home to save his companion. Were they misled because of casual disobedience? Will they both be saved because of Elder Weber's efforts to be exactly obedient?

TRYING **THE SPIRITS** IN *THE ANGEL*

Doubt and deception are existential threats for obedient followers. The 2024 short film *The Angel*, directed by Barrett and Jessica Burgin, realizes this in striking ways. *The Angel* is rigorous in historical and cultural detail. While *Heretic* does offer a nuanced and respectful portrayal of missionaries by subverting *Book of Mormon Musical*/*South Park* stereotypes of modern Mormon naiveté, *The Angel* grounds its narrative in the late 1800s of southern Utah's isolated desert landscape. It follows two polygamous wives visited by an angel with disturbing news, and even worse demands.

The Burgins have taken a Robert Eggers approach of steeping their film in lived-in period detail. This is Mormon folk horror by creators who deeply understand the faith and its unruly history. The film's authenticity allows it to walk the tightrope between insider specificity and universal resonance. What might feel like esoteric detail just serves to build out the cultural and religious worldview of the characters. By embedding tons of Mormon easter eggs, subtle nods, and cinematic homage throughout, the Burgins also pave the way for a new kind of Mormon cinema, one conversant with great cinema.

In the Saints and Cinema course I teach at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, I often tell students one of the best ways to demand and create better films is to become more fluent in the language of the past masterpieces and diverse styles from across the globe. So, naturally I had to grin when I first watched *The Angel* and the titular character (played by Doug Jones, who has spent a good chunk of his career playing otherworldly creatures) breaks the fourth wall. He looks straight into the camera, directly at the audience.

It's a loaded shot. On one level, it's a classic Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, pulling the viewer out of passive immersion and forcing critical engagement with an artistic creation.⁶ But it's more than that. I had the sneaking suspicion it cribbed the effect from Jonathan Demme's use of it in *Silence of the Lambs*, when he had Anthony Hopkins look right into the camera while being interviewed by Jodie Foster's character to torment the audience. In *The Angel*, it appears as a fantastic homage hinting to the viewer that this angel might not be so trustworthy. But the Burgins also related to me in a later conversation how they not only had *Silence of the Lambs* references in their storyboarding, but that the shot was equally inspired by Ingmar Bergman's masterpiece, *Persona* (1966). In that mesmerizing film, Alma and Elisabet each look directly at the camera in famously unsettling ways. Like *The Angel*, it even revolves around the tense relationship between two women. (We shouldn't forget that *Persona* also features a close-up of a nail being driven into Christ's palm, which is not insignificant for *The Angel*). Finally, the shot may conjure up connotations for LDS viewers of dramatizations of Satan directly addressing congregants in perhaps the most Mormon movie of all, the film accompanying the endowment ceremony.

That's what is so promising about *The Angel*. It's not just horror with LDS characters. It's horror

that functions like Mormonism, at least in the way it physically implicates its audience. It directly addresses them—spiritually, culturally, historically, and viscerally. And that's what horror does at its best: it bypasses easy viewing and wakes up the body.

I find this quite compelling. Like the larger arthouse horror fare, current Mormon horror is maturing. Even in short form, it's demanding attention. The Burgins and Carraways use the genre to reject the saccharine sentimentality of some of the most popular LDS films. They understand, much like the directors of the New German Cinema that "Papas Kino ist tot," the cinema of their fathers' is dead. They have written as much in their long manifesto for a new Mormon cinema. Now is time for the undead and new cinematic forms to haunt Mormonism in productive ways. Something new is emerging, something more cinematic, more thoughtful, and more willing to engage with faith as a complex, sometimes terrifying duality between being led and misled.

AUDIENCE AWARENESS

It just so happens, that all three (*Heretic*, *Handbook*, and *The Angel*) are also a bit stabby. They each forego Hitchcockian suggestion, in favor of directly showing slicing, slashing, and punctures of human flesh. Certainly, horror doesn't have to do this. But the horror of witnessing these acts of violence is core to each and heightens the stakes of the plot as well as the audience's engagement. And yet, it's the atmosphere and vibe of each that elevates the blade work on screen. It was



The Angel, Barrett and Jessica Burgin, 2024, Burgindie Pictures



The Angel, Barrett and Jessica Burgin, 2024, Burgindie Pictures

Walter Benjamin, who compared the cameraman to a surgeon. Painters are like magicians, he wrote, but a filmmaker is a surgeon, who “operates by piercing the patient’s body” and with the medium of film “penetrates deeply into the tissue of reality.”⁷ Cutting up the human body is one of the legacy metaphors of cinema, a medium that can cut up and edit reality to help us feel and see in new ways. And how much might a scene of being gouged capture the sense of feeling gutted, once one realizes they’ve been misled?

When I screened *The Angel* in my Saints and Cinema course, some were legitimately creeped out. The discussion afterwards was electric. Students from the Philippines, China, India, the Pacific and the U.S. engaged with the film on multiple levels. They were shocked by the audacity of the film to make them feel something and then have to think through what it all meant, to come to terms with their feelings.

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I’ve been arguing how directly the film addresses Mormon bodies through its folkloric fidelity. But when we had a virtual Q&A with the directors they answered a student’s question about Latter-day Saints as the target audience, saying “No. They may be the best audience in some ways, but they are the last audience we are aiming for.” And yet, Jessica mentioned later, looking directly at a female student, saying that as a woman in this church, the film was also, in a special way, “for me and for you.” She spoke about her ancestors in southern Utah, about their ties to polygamy, even supernatural experiences they recorded—themes that run through the DNA of the film too.

This is where the film even intersects a bit with recent trends in gynae-horror—a subgenre that explores female bodily experience in ways that are often unsettling, visceral, and deeply personal.⁸ Films like *Raw*, *Titane*, *Revenge*, and *The Substance* don’t just depict

women's corporeal trauma; they force the audience to come face to face with it and feel it. *The Angel* does something similar, particularly in its climax, where the film's horror ramps up in a way that feels both inevitable and revelatory.

After committing a heinous deed, one wife washes the blood from her hands at the well where the Angel first appeared. But this is worse than Macbeth. Just as she begins to settle into her post-murder cleanse, her hands are stained anew. This time, instead of blood from external consequences, it's from an internal catastrophe, with devastating implications for an expecting mother. It's horror that acknowledges anxieties and ambitions of religious women around history, agency, belief, and power, without flattening the characters into mere metaphors. *Heretic* makes one of the sisters' contraceptive implant a plot point, but *The Angel* imagines the motherly instinct and supernatural lengths one might go to ensure a healthy

birth. By drawing on gynaehorror, *The Angel* amplifies the often-silenced corporeal and existential experiences of women in general, but also within the specific landscape of Mormonism.

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Of course, there have been other Mormon horror films. The earliest silent Mormonsploitation films often had a proto-horror element to them of control, abduction, and murder.⁹ Because of my admiration for the unique style and context, I must mention Jose Oliveira's Spanish fantaterror films, *Beware of Darkness* (*Las Flores del Miedo*, 1973) and *The Dead, the Devil, and the Flesh* (*Los Muertos, la carne, y el diablo*, 1974). Burgin's *Cryo* (2022) utilized horror elements and the found footage entries of *The Gallows* (2015) and *Deadstream* (2022) were quite successful. There was also *Book of Zombie* (2010) and

Vamp U (2011). And certainly, even more horror titles would fit in a wider net of "by, about, or involving Latter-day Saints in the production."



The Angel, Barrett and Jessica Burgin, 2024, Burgindie Pictures

However, the three I began with feature explicitly Mormon characters with spectacular specificity. And they each feel like the filmmakers took 3-dimensional Mormon characters and put them in a petri dish of extreme circumstances and imagined how they might respond. In *Heretic* and *The Handbook*, believable Mormon missionaries are now the victims but with personality (even intellect) and agency. In *The Angel*, the polygamous Mormon wives are both victims and perpetrators of violence. That might just be the most unsettling configuration. We can all root for an undeserving victim. But what if they are potentially both?

Okay, so two of my picks may be lower budget shorts and the other one helmed by non-Mormon filmmakers, but all three of these get me excited about the possibilities of Mormon horror. Each one freaks me out in specific ways that make me feel like I might not be alone. All three gesture beyond cookie cutter portrayals of simple thrills. They take a stab at treating the complexities of faith, doubt, obedience, and historical narratives in ways that feel specific to the (American) Mormon experience but resonant with more universal human experiences. In each, we are invited to not only feel something raw and unnerving but to investigate those feelings and their rational implications. Could these unsettling films be a uniquely uncomfortable but entertaining pathway to understanding? That by feeling this stuff in our guts first—the heartbeats, the skin-crawls—we might actually grasp something deeper about Mormon culture, history, and dare I say, each other? The prospect seems promising, especially if we buy into the idea that bodies are eternal and offer a fulness of knowing.

As Nietzsche said, “There is more understanding in your body than in your highest philosophy.”¹⁰ Or was that Joseph Smith?¹¹

ENDNOTES

- 1 Landsberg, Alison. “Horror Verité: Politics and History in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017).” *Continuum* 32 (2018): 629-42. doi:10.1080/10304312.2018.1500522.
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- 5 Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 35.
- 6 Burgin also used the effect throughout his feature film *Cryo* (2022).
- 7 Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemman and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 458-459.
- 8 Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*. (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 9 *Victim of the Mormons* (1911) and *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922) were two popular examples. See Randy Astle, “Heretic, Humanism, and The Modern Transcendental Mormon Film,” *Dawning of a Brighter Day*, associationmormonletters.org, November 27, 2024. <https://www.associationmormonletters.org/2024/11/heretic-humanism-and-the-modern-transcendental-mormon-film/>
- 10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also, Sprach Zarathustra, Band 4 Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli; Mazzino Montinari, (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 40.
- 11 Doctrine and Covenants 9:8-9; 88:15; and 88:68 all suggest the significance of the body for feeling truth and gaining light and wisdom. Joseph emphasized the corporeal nature of knowledge when he taught that “no one can truly say he knows God until he has handled something” in “Discourse, 1 May 1842, as Reported by Willard Richards,” p. 94, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-1-may-1842-as-reported-by-willard-richards/1>



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