
THE AESTHETICS OF THE ENDOWMENT

Artistic considerations weigh against abandoning the live-action endowment

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FOR all the discussion of “Mormon” art, its potentials and pitfalls, little, if anything, has been said of our most significant and indigenous artistic model, the endowment. Certainly its most immediate effect is sensory, aesthetic. As a complex ritual it combines in unique architectural settings elements of narrative, acting, recitation, pantomime, costume, painting, and more recently, lighting effects and film. This blend can and ought to be evaluated in aesthetic terms—particularly now, a time in which the trend is toward replacing live-action endowment with film endowment, a crucial aesthetic alteration.

The endowment is not just theatre, nor film, nor pantomime, and so on. It is, in design and intent, a unique form in contemporary western culture. But for our purposes it is useful to work from this premise: the traditional endowment is most closely akin to theatre. It is so in a general way, simply by its use of a basic theatrical feature—acted-out narrative. More specifically, the endowment contains several features generally associated with the theatre of the *avant-garde*.¹

First, in the traditional endowment, actors and audience are enclosed in one setting. There is no stage; or, more accurately, performers and spectators are on stage simultaneously, thus blurring the distinction between the two. That distinction is further confused by the use of alternating narrative sequences that shift in

point of view. In some, certain characters are explicitly to be identified with by the spectators. In other sequences, the spectators are to be referred to and addressed as separate characters in their own right, namely a congregation. Endowments performed for the dead are even more complicated. One is told to identify himself with a person who is dead—a person usually never known before and, in effect, experienced only in the imagination of the vicarious worker—for whom the endowment is being experienced. In these cases the relationship of performer to spectator, and spectator to aesthetic space, is clearly as complex as in the most experimental theatre, if not more so.

Second, because all participants begin enclosed together in a fixed aesthetic space, scene changes are effected by a physical exodus of actors and audience and their entry (direct or indirect) into another setting. Such physical movement from setting to setting is qualitatively different from between-scenes blackouts, a common feature of recent traditional western theatre. It also constitutes more than mere reorientation to the reality of physical surroundings, as opposed to represented surroundings, and real time, as opposed to represented time. Rather, by the orderly fashion in which it is carried out, it constitutes a separate artistic gesture, that of a conventionalized processional.

A third “experimental” feature of the endowment is

the transposition and mingling of widely variegated historical time, place, and incident into one aesthetic time, place, and incident. Because of this, certain unique effects are inevitable. Characters, for example, can function as themselves, when placed in their proper historical situation; at other times, by displacement, they can become symbols or types.

Fourth, there is a certain improvisatory quality to each rendition of the endowment ceremony. Performers very often work together for the first time in a performance itself. There is no rehearsal, no director, no controlling human intelligence orchestrating individual

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performances into a cohesive whole. In practice this creates a texture of varying approaches and interpretations. This lack of cohesion can sometimes be extreme. Thus, one frequently encounters a strange fluctuation between plain recitation, wherein a performer seems to believe the text carries its full import devoid of human expression or emotional interpretation; and heightened speech, wherein the performer feels free to *act*, to freely express and emote.

At the center of such conflicting styles of rendition lies a unique feature of the endowment: its text has little or no aesthetic existence outside of its performance. It cannot be contemplated or appreciated for itself (as can a play). This is not to say there is no script. But it is deliberately made unavailable for contemplation. Let us qualify this. The written particulars of the endowment are accessible to a relative handful of people—temple leaders, high church officials, and so on. Various transcriptions of witnessed endowments are occasionally published as expose, but these are not comparable to authoritative scripts in theatre or screen plays in film, wherein a text is authored first to be read and then later produced. That most Latter-day Saints simply refuse to study these transcriptions (aside from the question of their accuracy) reflects perhaps an intuitive sense of the endowment's essential integrity of medium, as much as a mistrust of the documents' sources. Reading such transcriptions leaves one cold, not merely for the betrayal of the promises of secrecy once made by their authors, but for the aesthetic implausibility of reducing the endowment to the printed word; it becomes thin, bloodless. Reading these transcriptions is somewhat analogous to listening to piano reductions of a well-known symphony.

Another unique feature of the endowment is its

extreme elitist quality. It is a far cry from the public art to which we have become accustomed, one in which there is no criterion for admission but money. Performances of the endowment are circumscribed by worthiness recommends and are only to be appreciated by those who have proven themselves spiritually sensible.² Furthermore, the ritual can be performed only in ceremonially sanctified buildings which are erected for few other purposes than to house its enactment. A corollary of this elitist quality is the endowment's lack of commercial potential. It is unquestionably art; yet it is produced outside the realm of commission, profit



motive, or any sense of "box-office." Whatever pressures are brought to bear on the ritual, then, will be of a significantly different order than many of the pressures on theatre or film creation and performance.

Because these aesthetic and cultural features of the endowment are so rarely considered, radical changes in presentation are readily made and accepted. This fact and the fact that so much discussion of the temple focuses on the "meaning" behind the endowment together confirm the existence of what we may call the *interpretive fallacy* of the endowment. This fallacy reveals itself in the preoccupation with what any myth, ritual, or art *means*, rather than what it *is*, and, more importantly, what it by nature *does*. Susan Sontag wisely suggests that one who is thus bent on interpretation really says that he finds the work in question somehow unacceptable or outmoded in terms other than its own. When figurative scripture or ritual is viewed only in this way, the emphasis shifts from experience to "comprehension": what does the endowment, the ritual drama, mean? rather than, what is it to be endowed?

Consider our colloquial terminology. We often hear of "taking out" endowments, as though the actual endowment were something to be extracted from the ritual experience, something we get out of it, rather than the experience itself. A more precise and helpful terminology would speak of "being endowed." This suggests that the experience itself does something to us, changes of itself our spiritual status and perceptive powers (compare "being baptized"). Continually looking for what can be gotten from the endowment, what message or moral or theological truth might be contained in it, ignores the unconventional beauty of construction and visceral power that constitute this endowment—that is, gift—from God. Proper

appreciation of these and other features demands that we be less caught up with hermeneutics and be content to “feel more than we understand.”³

If we thus concern ourselves with what the endowment is and does, we must then ask, can film by its nature do the same things as live performers? In some sense, yes. It can visually transmit human form, expression, gesture, and, through the recorded soundtrack, language. But even if visual, auditory, and other sensuous impressions could be accurately duplicated and transmitted, our belief in extra-sensory spiritual existence would compel us to admit a



qualitative difference between real beings and even the most meticulous representations of them. The sharpest, cleanest film images in the endowment can never compensate for the fact that movies are essentially discrete, without spirit, while human experience is continuous, spiritually charged. In live-action endowment there is a potential for spiritual and energetic transmission not found in film endowment. This is so by the nature and consistency of the different media.⁴ And, beyond this, the illusive character of the film medium inverts a basic theme of temple experience: instead of inculcating the sensation that what is not seen is really there, film reinforces its disturbing opposite—that what is seen is not really there.

When presenting narrative characters, the film medium creates a specific and problematic consideration, namely the fixity of characterization. The problem of film characterization is most succinctly explained by Erwin Panofsky in his essay, “Style and Medium in the Motion Picture.”⁵ He insists that, in contrast to theatre characters, the characters portrayed in film “have no aesthetic existence outside of the actors” because they are created to be played once only. This assessment is reasonable for most film characters, but is not strictly accurate in the case of the endowment for two reasons. First, film endowment is designed to be regularly refilmed using different actors. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the characters appear and are referred to in other contexts such as the scriptures. On the other hand, numerous viewings of a fixed, undeviating performance—the exception for general film viewing, but the rule for the endowment—create strong associations and identifications. Therefore when a new film appears one may feel alienated from the work for a time; or, when a character is encountered in

another context one may easily begin to have a film-conditioned image of him. If, however, one is not alienated from a new film, it will often be because one prefers the new film, or specifically, the portrayal of one or more characters. In any case, because of fixity of performance—especially with more stylized roles such as Satan—one may be at odds with the same endowment performance for years, and thereby be driven from aesthetic satisfaction in the characters.

The unique properties of film art are rarely argued in terms of enhancing characterization, however, but rather in terms of film’s potential to expand aesthetic or

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contemplated space. Again, Panofsky: in the theatre “space is static, that is, the space represented on the stage, as well as the spatial relation of the beholder to the spectacle, are unalterably fixed.” In movies, he continues, the situation is reversed. The spectator is in constant aesthetic motion, the contemplated space continually shifting as the “eye identifies itself with the lens of the camera.” He is correct in a sense. Yet one must constantly remember that it is the *illusion* of space that film creates and plays upon. Whether this is a desirable alternative in endowment practice is debatable, particularly if we compare it to the aesthetic enclosure of endowment rooms and the physical movement of participants from setting to setting—clearly different from the theatrical situation Panofsky envisions. Although the simulation of spatial interest and variety is achieved by the lens-eye identification, the net effect is the reduction of the area of contemplated space. Instead of the traditional head-turning to study the enclosing surfaces, their architecture and decoration, we are drawn to a relatively small rectangular surface of reflected light in an otherwise darkened room. Less of the actual physical space is appreciated or appreciable.

There is, admittedly, a certain value to literal film representation of natural scenic beauty in creation sequences. It incites to a contemplation of the majesty and beauty of God’s works. Were this the only intent of the endowment, however, the temple enclosure itself would be unnecessary, even self-defeating. It is reasonable to propose an intrinsic purpose to the design and enclosure of endowment rooms which are themselves representational. One function of the temple is to heighten perception of what is there to be appreciated, among which are the inherent properties of sacred architecture, craftsmanship, and temple space.

The tendency of film is to divert the mind from its physical location to another location that is literally yet illusively depicted by moving pictures.

Moreover, the quest for literalism in the endowment has extended far beyond on-location scenic filming. It has engendered the use of sets, props, costuming, make-up, and special effects. These, of course, are scarcely present in a traditional live-action endowment wherein we find a "poor theatre," using Grotowski's non-pejorative terminology.⁶ "Poor theatre" is theatre stripped of unessentials, one that focuses on gesture. As Grotowski argues, the acceptance of such a poverty in

the movie house, our most immediate response is to production values: is it good special effects technique? Specifically, are the effects adequate to create the illusion of reality? rather than, do they illuminate and excite to a contemplation of the miracle of creation itself? Refinement of production values can produce a positive response to the former question but not necessarily to the latter. Ritual values disregard the former entirely, unconcerned as they are with conventional experience of the world.

The same difficulties arise in connection with other production values. In the end, a film may or may not be

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theatre will reveal "not only the backbone of the medium but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form." We cannot rehearse his entire uniqueness argument here. Suffice it to say, by continuing the "impoverished" live-action endowment we will probably enrich the imaginative processes best suited to deep endowment experience. For, accepting that the endowment narrative is highly imaginative in construction and untrue to conventional experience, it is logical to present it in a highly imaginative way. The nearer we attempt film literalism, the more we risk screening the essence with technique.

But confusion of values is perhaps the greater danger. Confusion of values is the natural result of transposing the endowment from a form with which we in the West are basically unfamiliar, into a form with which we are quite familiar. We have few preconceived ideas about ritual. We sense the foreignness of the medium and are more bound to accept it on its own terms. However, by the time we are mature enough to be endowed we are usually far more familiar with film. We often have a relatively refined, if inarticulate, sense of production values and technical achievement and consequently a strong sense of taste in the medium. When ritual experience is converted to film experience, confusion of values is almost inevitable. In such a case, one responds negatively or positively to what is a value of the film and unknowingly takes it for a response to the endowment per se.

Consider special effects. The film world has shown itself increasingly prodigious in creating by special effects the illusion of the miraculous, the unprecedented, and the majestic. Therefore, when we view less sophisticated, even simplistic effects—scenes of earth's creation for example, whether in the temple or

comparable even to other films, or a ritual to other rituals. But since film is from its origins a medium of technology, even when housing a ritual drama it cannot be approached without technological concerns. These concerns can easily mask the direct, unencumbered features of the endowment. The mixture of these two media makes each clumsy and difficult to properly appreciate or evaluate.

My point is simple: whatever the utilitarian advantages of film endowments in terms of pace, accuracy, dependability, multi-lingual use, and conservation of human energy, there are aesthetic considerations of potentially great consequence that weight heavily against the abandonment of live-action endowment. Whether one agrees with the specifics of this endowment theory or not, the need for such discussions should be apparent. Only active, ever-broadening perception of all the features of our religious experience will reveal the texture and worth of it.

Notes

1. However these are really permutations and borrowings from the techniques of ritual.
2. Though not necessarily aesthetically sensible. A fault of much so-called temple preparation is the neglect of aesthetic preparation. This could well include attendance at dramatic productions, and the public rituals of other faiths, e.g. the Catholic mass, Orthodox weddings, etc.
3. See Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Scribner's, 1964), p. 75.
4. This, incidentally, is the argument of some avant-garde theorists, e.g. Grotowski, who argue the unique expressive capabilities of live theatre.
5. See *Critique* 1 (January-February 1947).
6. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

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