

FAITH, FILM, AND CULTURE

TH 429-3, J-Term 2008

Monday-Friday, 9:00 – 11:30 am
Nelson Hall 119
Film viewings: Sundays 7 p.m.
(occasionally Mondays 7 p.m.)

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This online syllabus should be used to gain a better understanding of the content and focus of a course. The syllabus given out in the class may differ from this online version and its content supersedes that of the online syllabus.

This is a course designed to introduce the student to ways of thinking critically and theologically about contemporary popular film and the messages about religion and values films convey. We will begin by examining a variety of theoretical approaches to film interpretation and then turn to a number of recent films to explore the ways in which such themes as human nature, evil and suffering, transcendence, moral and religious redemption, and religious and cultural difference are portrayed. We will give special attention to the contributions of this popular visual and narrative medium to public debate on moral and religious issues in the church and in society.

Requirements

1. *Preparation and participation:* You are asked to attend all class sessions, view all the required films for the course, and keep current in the assigned reading so that you may enter effectively into the class discussion. Your thoughtful contribution to class discussion will count as 15% of the final grade.
2. *Theology and film journal:* Students are to keep a journal recording their thinking as it develops in response to their viewing of films, their reading, and the class discussion. This journal may summarize significant themes arising in films and writing on films and should include your attempts at theological interpretation, using one or another of the critical methods discussed in the class. Students will be asked to read from their journals from time to time in class. The journal is to be handed in to the instructor on **December 8** and will count toward 25% of the grade.
3. *Film review:* A short (600-900 word) review of the film *Million Dollar Baby* is **due January 4**. Write for an audience interested in the intersection of faith, film, and culture. For models, see reviews in *The Journal of Religion and Film* (esp. Frederick J. Ruf's recent review of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No1/Reviews/motorcycles.htm>) or *The Christian Century*. This assignment will count toward 5% of the grade.
4. *Approaches to film interpretation paper:* Students will write a short (2-4 page) paper outlining one of the methods of film interpretation outlined by Bywater and Sobchack in *Introduction to Film Criticism* (humanist, auteurist, genre, social science, historical, ideological/theoretical). The paper will serve as the basis for an in-class presentation and discussion of methodological options in interpreting film. **Due January 11**. This assignment will count toward 25% of the grade.
5. *Theological analysis of a film:* Students are to write a 6-8 page paper utilizing a method of analysis or interpretation discussed in class or in the assigned reading to arrive at a theological reading of a film of their own choosing. **Due January 17**. The paper will count as 30% of the final grade.

Books available for purchase

Required: Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, ed., *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

Recommended: Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack, *Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film* (New York: Longman, 1989).

These and other books from which assignments are made are on reserve at the Ernest Miller White Library.

- January 8* Redeeming Time in *Groundhog Day*
 Required reading:
 Marsh and Ortiz 155-165
 Bywater and Sobchack ch. 5 and 6
- January 9* Cyber-Messianism: *The Matrix*
 Required reading:
 James L. Ford, "Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema," *Journal of Religion and Film*,
<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>
 Bywater and Sobchack ch. 7 and Appendix
 Further reading:
 Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner, "Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix," *Journal of Religion and Film*,
<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>
 William Irwin, *The Matrix and Philosophy*
 Chris Seay and Greg Garrett, *The Gospel Reloaded*
 John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 295-300
- January 10* Parables of Love, Loss, Memory: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
 Required reading:
 David L. Smith, "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Question of Transcendence," *Journal of Religion and Film*,
<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>
 Augustine, *Confessions* 10.24/35-28/39
 Further reading:
 Brannon M. Hancock, "Film Review: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," *Journal of Religion and Film*, <http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>
- III. RELIGION, HISTORY, AND THE POLITICS OF VIEWING
- January 11* Interpreting Film: Discussion of Method
Student presentations: Film interpretation paper due
 Required reading:
 By now, students should have made their way through Bywater and Sobchack
- January 14* On the Road, Again: *Thelma and Louise* and Cultural Readings of Women, Love, and Violence
 Required reading:
 Marsh and Ortiz 87-95
 Supplemental viewing:
The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de Motocicleta)
 Further reading:
 Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing* 136-156
 Sharon Willis, *High Contrast* 98-128
 Frederick J. Ruf, "Film Review: *The Motorcycle Diaries*," *Journal of Religion and Film*, <http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>
- January 15* Power, Evil, And Superfamily Values: *Spider-Man 2* and *The Incredibles*
 Required reading:
 John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* 21-48
 Frank Rich, "Spidey Crushes 'Fahrenheit' in 2004," *New York Times*, July 11, 2004

V. EXPLORING MORAL WORLDS

January 16 Truth and Power, Crime and Punishment in *Dead Man Walking*

Required reading:

Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine* 130-156

January 17 Ethics and Entanglements (Vision, Truth, and Faith): *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

Theological analysis paper due

Required reading:

Reinhold Zwick, "The Problem of Evil in Contemporary Film," in May, *New Image of Religious Film* 72-91

[January 21, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day: No Class]

January 22 Race, Otherness, and the City in *Do The Right Thing* and *Crash*

Theology and film journal due

Required reading:

Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* ch. 5

Further reading:

Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing* 157-167

Sharon Willis, *High Contrast* 158-188

Joel W. Martin, "Redeeming America: Rocky as Ritual Racial Drama", in Martin and Ostwalt, ed., *Screening the Sacred*, 125-133

Select Bibliography for Theological Themes in Contemporary Film

Books:

- Baugh, Lloyd. *Imaging the Divine* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997).
- Billingsley, Lloyd. *The Seductive Image: a Christian Critique of the World of Film* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989).
- Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1990).
- Bywater, Tim, and Thomas Sobchack. *Introduction to Film Criticism* (Longman, 1989).
- Chernus, Ira. *Dr. Strangegod: On the Symbolic Meaning of Nuclear Weapons* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1986).
- Detweiler, Craig and Barry Taylor. *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003.
- Erens, Patricia. *The Jew in American Cinema* (Indiana U. Press, 1984).
- Ferlita, Ernest and John R. May. *Film Odyssey: The Art of Film as Search for Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 1976).
- Friedman, Lester. *The Jewish Image in American Film* (Secaucus: Citadel, 1987).
- Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom & Discernment* Intervarsity Press, 2002.
- Hill, Geoffrey. *Illuminating Shadows: The Mythic Power of Film* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992).
- Hillier, Jim. *The New Hollywood* (New York: Continuum, 1989).
- Holloway, Ronald. *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: Film Oikoumene, 1977).
- Hurley, Neil P. *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).
- Hurley, Neil P. *Theology through Film* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) [Republished as *Toward a Film Humanism* (New York: Delta Paperbacks, 1975)].
- Jewett, Robert. *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).
- Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology And Film In Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000).
- Kammen, Michael. *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th century* (New York: Knopf, 1999).
- Keller, Catherine. *Apocalypse Now and Then* Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- Kort, Wesley. *Narrative Elements and Religious Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975.
- Lyden, John C. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. (New York: NYU Press, 2003).
- Marsh, Clive and Gaye Ortiz. *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
- Martin, Joel W., and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995).
- Martin, Thomas. *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film* (Associated University Presses, 1991).
- May, John R., ed. *New Image of Religious Film* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997).
- May, John R. and Michael Bird. *Religion in Film* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).
- May, John. *Film Odyssey: The Art of Film as Search for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976).
- May, John R., ed. *Image and Likeness: Religious Visions in American Film Classics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).
- Medved, Michael. *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
- Miles, Margaret. *Seeing and Believing* (Beacon, 1996).
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia: Language, History, Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- O'Brien, Tom. *The Screening of America: Movies and Values from 'Rocky' to 'Rainman'* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

- O'Leary, Stephen. *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- Plate, S. Brent, and David Jasper, ed. *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).
- Reinhartz, Adele. *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).
- Russo, Vito. *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
- Ryan, Michael and Douglas Kellner. *Camera Politica: The Politics of Ideology and Contemporary American Film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
- Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).
- Seay, Chris, and Greg Garrett. *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix* (Pinon, 2003).
- Stern, Richard C., et al. *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).
- Stone, Brian P. *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).
- Tatum, W. Barnes. *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1997.
- Sara Anson Vaux. *Finding Meaning at the Movies*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Wall, James M. *Church and Cinema: A Way of Viewing Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971).
- Walsh, Richard. *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, Intl., 2003).
- Wills, Sharon. *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

Internet sites:

The Internet Movie Database: www.imdb.com. A site that supplies a wealth of information, plot summaries, cast and full credits, and links to reviews.

Jesus: real to reel: <http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/Real2Reel/realreel.htm>. Devoted to studies of Jesus through film, this site also features links to a variety of resources on the topic of religion and film.

The Journal of Religion and Film: <http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>. An online journal with articles and reviews, mostly written from a religious studies perspective.

Some Questions for Theological Interpretation of Films

I. Religion

Is religion treated in the film? Explicitly or implicitly?

In what form is religion depicted? As institutional, communal or individual? With attention to particularities of belief and/or practice?

How are understandings of or attitudes toward religion conveyed or elicited?

Does the film display religious dimensions (such as symbol, ritual, or myth) outside the context of any explicit reference to religion or religious practice?

II. Theology

Does the film advance a particular religious or theological vision?

Does it disclose a perspective on God, the sacred, or transcendence?

On the human condition or predicament?

On the nature of community?

On redemption or liberation?

What attitudes toward nature or history are communicated in the film?

Does it convey messages about the goal or consummation of history? About the capacity of human beings to affect historical outcomes?

III. Values

Are particular values advanced in the film?

Are certain values called into question?

By what techniques does the film advocate or denigrate particular values?

Are certain values or social arrangements assumed as normative?

How are gender roles and relations, race and ethnicity, and social class depicted?

IV. Contextual readings

Are there continuities between themes addressed in the film and those taken up in other contemporary films?

To what experience(s) of the contemporary cultural moment might one relate the film's treatment of religion and values?

To what matters of contemporary debate, concern, or anxiety does the film speak?

Are pertinent issues ignored?

Does the film address a particular audience? marginalize particular viewers?