

## Religious Studies Courses

### **RS 267/Fine 253 FILM AND QUEST FOR MEANING 2 Winter 2007**

Religion reflects both humanity's search for meaning and its attempts to maintain particular meanings in the face of cultural challenge and social pressure. In this course, we will use a number of science fiction films to examine some of the ways in which these processes occur, particularly in terms of first contact, what it means to be human, and religion and myth in the science fiction film. While some films will deal with obvious and easily recognizable religious topics, others will reveal their religious elements only upon closer, more critical examination. As our culture passes relentlessly from the more literary to the more visual, discerning how the varied dimensions of the human quest for meaning are reflected in cinematic texts is an important element in understanding the nature of religious belief and practice in late modern society.

"See every film ever made. Fill up on the medium."  
—Ray Bradbury—

Instructor Dr. Douglas E. Cowan  
Renison College 1613 (Founder's Building 5A)  
519-884-4404 x28607; decowan@uwaterloo.ca

N.b., since every student is assigned a University of Waterloo email account, please use that for all electronic communications with me. Often the university servers interpret accounts such as Yahoo and Hotmail as spam, and delete the messages automatically. This means that either I may not get your message, or you may not get my reply.

Office Hours: 5:30–6:30 p.m., Monday and 9:00–10:00 a.m., Wednesday; or by appointment

Teaching Assistant: David Feltmate  
PAS 1088  
519-888-4567 x33497; dsfeltma@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca

Class Location: Renison College 2106

Class Times: Monday, 6:30–9:20 p.m.

Required Readings: RS 267/FA 253 Courseware Solutions: readings pack available at the Bookstore

N.b., should unforeseen circumstances arise, the instructor reserves the right to

modify the syllabus as he sees fit to ensure the academic and pedagogical integrity of the course.

Please note that this is a Religious Studies course that has been cross-listed for students in Fine Arts. It is not a Fine Arts course that deals with religious topics. This is an important distinction of which students should be aware.

## **Course Goals**

In this course, students will:

- learn to appreciate and experience science fiction films as significant cultural texts that both reflect and reflect on the religious diversity, theological struggle, and ethical and moral dilemmas of late modern society;
- engage in critical dialogue with these texts and experiences, with scholars who have contributed to their interpretation, and with each other;
- develop communication skills through written assignments and class participation; and
- continue to foster skills in critical thinking and analysis.

## **Coursework and Evaluation**

### **Class Participation**

Attendance at and participation in all class sessions is expected. While class attendance does not count towards your grade, per se, there is simply no way to expect that a student can do well in a course if he or she is unwilling to attend. This is especially important for a class that meets only once a week. Put simply, you should not miss class—ever. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class session.

### **Film Viewing**

I am a great believer in the value of watching films collectively. As a group, we see different things than when we view films alone, and we very often react differently to what we do see. Even if you have already seen some of the films we will be viewing this semester (even several times), you are still required to be here for the class viewing period. You will, very likely, see something different.

Films are both cultural texts and social experiences, and you should consider all the listed films as the primary required texts for the course. The basic sequence for the course is that we will view the film one week and deal with initial comments and questions either before the viewing or at the conclusion. We will have a full discussion of the film the following class session.

### **Film Analysis Papers (30%)**

Each student will prepare a weekly film analysis paper for each film viewed during the course. These constitute a significant portion of your grade, and I urge

you to take them very seriously. Each analysis paper will be a minimum 500 words, and I will provide detailed instructions on ways to approach this assignment, as well as the various components I expect to see in each paper.

Film analysis papers will be collected three times during the semester:

- in two weeks (22 January), after you have completed your first paper. These will be marked up, but not graded, so that you can have sufficient feedback on what I expect in the analysis papers; you may rework these papers as you see fit, and resubmit them:
- immediately before Reading Week (16 February). The three analysis papers for the first half of the course are due in the Renison College main office before 4:00 p.m.
- 5 April: Your full set of analysis papers must be dropped off in the Renison College main office before 4:00 p.m.

Papers turned in after the due dates will be penalized at a rate of 1 point per day late. I do not grant Incompletes or extensions, except in cases of medical or family emergency, and documentation will be required. I do not offer the option for extra credit assignments.

N.b., film analysis papers are not weighted in terms of "so-many-points-per-paper"; at best, an incomplete set of papers can earn only half the marks available for the assignment.

### **Pop Quizzes (20%)**

There will be four pop quizzes given during the course, each one worth 5%. These will be short-answer quizzes, and cover conceptual material from the readings and the films. They can occur on any night during the course.

### **Research Paper (50%)**

Each student will write an original research paper on some aspect of religion and the science fiction film. Core constituents of the paper include:

- 2,500 words minimum
- Proper documentation and citation
- Meaningful engagement with both the primary material (i.e., the film[s] you discuss) and relevant secondary data.
- Due 5 April in the Renison College Main Office before 4:00 p.m.

As with the film analysis papers, Prof. Cowan will provide detailed instructions on how to complete this assignment. For an explanation of the grading criteria, see the Written Presentation Style Sheet attached to this syllabus. N.b., though you may use films from class for comparative purposes, they may not be used as the basis for your research paper.

### **Academic Honesty**

Please note that I have a zero tolerance policy for plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, and I follow up on all instances of plagiarism. Per

university regulations, please be sure you are aware of the following policies:

“Note on avoidance of academic offences: All students registered in the courses of the Faculty of Arts are expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their actions. When the commission of an offence is established, disciplinary penalties will be imposed in accord with Policy #71 (Student Academic Discipline). For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students are directed to consult the summary of Policy #71 which is supplied in the Undergraduate Calendar (section 1; on the Web at [www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm)). If you need help in learning what constitutes an academic offence; how to avoid offences such as plagiarism, cheating, and double submission; how to follow appropriate rules with respect to “group work” and collaboration; or if you need clarification of aspects of the discipline policy, ask your TA and/or your course instructor for guidance. Other resources regarding the discipline policy are your academic advisor and the Undergraduate Associate Dean.”

Student who believe they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve; refer to Policy #70, Student Grievance, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm>.

## **Schedule of Films**

(N.b., the dates listed indicated the evening on which we will view the film; discussion will take place the following class session. All readings should be completed prior to the discussion of that film.)

### **First Contact**

Jan 8 The War of the Worlds  
(Haskin 1953; 85 min.)

Jan 15 Peters, “Exo-Theology”  
Cowan, “Intelligences Vast and Cool and Unsympathetic”

Jan 22 Contact  
(Zemeckis 1997; 153 min.)

Jan 29 Stone, “Religious Faith and Science in Contact”  
Sison, “Epiphany of the Throne-Chariot”

Feb 5 Signs  
(Shyamalan 2002; 106 min.)

Feb 12 Sofair, “Signs”  
Cowan, “Dreams Wrapped in Nightmares”

Feb 16 First set of film analysis papers due in the Renison Main Office before 4:00 p.m.

## **The Question of Humanity**

Feb 26 Blade Runner  
(Scott 1982; 116 min.)

Mar 5 Keefer, "Knowledge and Mortality in Blade Runner and Genesis 2-3"  
Gravett, "The Sacred and the Profane"

Mar 12 Short Circuit  
(Badham 1986; 98 min.)

Mar 19 Asimov, "Robbie"  
Trussell, "I, Robot: You Gotta Have Heart"  
Myth and Religion in the Blockbuster Film

Mar 26 Star Wars (Ep. IV)  
(Lucas 1977; 125 min.)

Apr 2 Campbell, "The Monomyth"  
Gordon, "Star Wars: A Myth for Our Time"  
Brin and Stover, "Charge #2"

**Apr 5 Complete set of film analysis papers and final research paper due in the Renison Main Office before 4:30 p.m.**

## **Classroom Etiquette**

I have relatively few rules in my classroom, but please respect the ones I have.

- Respect the opinions of others. During class discussions, it is very likely that contradictory opinions will emerge, especially when we are dealing with highly emotional topics. There is no requirement in our class that students agree with each other, or with the instructors, but there is the mandate that the opinions expressed be respected.
- Please be on time. We will begin each class promptly, and I expect students to be in the room and ready to proceed. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class and if you are late, it will count as an absence.
- Use of cellphones for voice or text communication is prohibited in class, and all cellphones and pagers are expected to be turned off when you enter the classroom—not simply set to silent ring. If a student is found using one of these devices, he or she will be immediately asked to leave the classroom and will not be readmitted for that period. This, too, will count as an absence on the evaluation.

Douglas E. Cowan

Religious Studies  
University of Waterloo  
200 University Avenue West  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1  
519 888 4567



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