

University of Alabama  
Department of Religious Studies  
Fall Semester 2007  
[revised September 20, 2007]  
**Introduction to Religion in America**  
**Religious Studies 124: Religion Observed in Popular Film**  
Manly Hall, Room 207  
Monday, 3-5:40 PM

Instructor: Theodore L. Trost, Ph.D., Associate Professor  
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Hours: Tuesdays 1:30-2:30 PM and by appointment

### **Course Description**

Religious language, themes, and rituals appear with surprising frequency in contemporary American films. How does an awareness of this religious dimension in a work of "popular culture" affect our interpretation of its meaning? What do these often subtle traces of religion suggest about the American character? What narratives establish and reinforce the myth of America? And what does the broad popularity of these films say about the nature of being "religious" in America? These are the kinds of questions we will explore together in Religious Studies 124. We will focus on the enduring dialogue (or "debate," or even "culture war") between American culture and religious identity, or—in the language of the religious studies discipline—between the sacred and the profane. Our basic "texts" will be six films that have achieved box office or home rental success during the last thirty years. Our conversations about these films will be supplemented with careful readings of religious, cultural, and literary scholarship. The class will be conducted mainly as a seminar; it will also include occasional brief lectures.

### **Course Objectives**

- To participate actively in the in-class discussions
- To recognize the basic vocabulary of the religious studies discipline
- To recognize religious themes in works of popular culture
- To analyze critically the structure of at least one film
- To review critically at least one film using skills acquired during the semester

## Course Requirements

This course is limited to 30 participants. There are no prerequisites, but students should be aware that all writing will be evaluated according to the standards of excellence established during the first year English Composition sequence at the University of Alabama. Each participant is expected to contribute actively to the ongoing, in-class conversation. All written work must be TYPED (except work done in class). Graded assignments will include: 1) a structural analysis of one of the films (either *Being There* or *Crimes and Misdemeanors*); 2) a two-part film review critique and film review of 6 to 8 pages; 3) 5 or 6 quizzes (including an optional take-home final quiz); and 4) class participation, including pre-discussion assignments that will be graded pass/fail. All of these assignments are discussed in more detail on pages 7-9 of this syllabus.

1) Structural analysis of a film	150 points
2) Two-part film review	250 points
3) Quizzes	500 points
4) Class participation (including pre-discussion assignments)	100 points

In addition to viewing the films, reading the assignments is of crucial importance. Our work together as a class will presuppose familiarity with the films and the assigned readings—a familiarity that will be evaluated through the pre-discussion assignment questions. If you are unable to attend class or are unwilling to read with care an average of 50 pages per week, you should not take this course. [If attendance is a problem for you, it would advance both your interests and the interests of this class were you to "attend" a different course.]

Attendance at all class meetings is mandatory. That said, you may miss up to two class meetings without penalty. After two absences, however, the student's final grade will be reduced one grade for each additional absence. For example, a student with an A-average at the end of the semester plus four unexcused absences would have her grade reduced two full grades to a C-. The reason for this comparatively harsh measure is simple: you will be lost if you do not come to class. With only one meeting per week, each missed session is the equivalent of three missed classes of standard duration. If you know—or even suspect—that you cannot honor the attendance commitment, do not take this class.

Class discussions are central to how this course will proceed. The pre-discussion assignments are designed to engender in-class discussion. Please come to class with

written comments and questions that you would like us all to pursue together. Good class discussion is a sustained, wide-ranging-yet-focused, fun and exhilarating inquiry. It increases in quality and intensity as the semester progresses. Participation involves attentive listening as well as talking. We have a great deal to learn from each other. Listen respectfully to your colleagues; respond to their questions; build on their comments. This is what college is meant to be.

Feel free to visit me during my office hours with any concerns you may have about this class. Among other things, I am here to help you develop your writing and speaking skills. In addition, I recommend to you the resources of the University's Writing Center—which you should visit physically, or at least electronically, during the second week of classes: [http://www.as.ua.edu/english/writingcenter/public\\_html/](http://www.as.ua.edu/english/writingcenter/public_html/)

Academic honesty is expected of all students. All acts of dishonesty (plagiarism, cheating) in any work constitute academic misconduct. The Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed in the event of academic misconduct.

To request disability accommodations, please contact Disability Services (348-4285). After initial arrangements are made with that office, please see me.

### **Reading assignments**

The following writings are available in pdf format at the REL 124 course page: <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/rel124.html>

1. Russell T. McCutcheon, "What is the Publicly-Funded Study of Religion?"
2. David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlach of Rock 'n' Roll..."
3. Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwald, selections from *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*.
4. RWB Lewis, selections from *The American Adam*.
5. John Dominic Crossan, selections from *The Dark Interval*.

Additional readings will appear on the course page throughout the semester.

The textbook by Timothy J. Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, is recommended but not required.

**Religious Studies 124: Religion Observed in Popular Film**  
**Course Schedule**

1] Monday, August 27                      Introduction of Syllabus

assignment: 1) read McCutcheon and Chidester  
2) prepare Chidester pre-discussion assignment sheet (#1)  
3) submit assignment sheet as Word document attachment by noon,  
Friday, September 7

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Monday, September 3                      NO CLASS

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2] Monday, September 10                  Ron Shelton, dir., *Bull Durham* (1988) (108 minutes)  
active watching: diagramming film  
QUIZ #1: *Bull Durham* + Chidester reading

assignment: 1) read Martin and Ostwald  
2) prepare Martin and Ostwald pre-discussion assignment sheet (#2)  
3) submit assignment sheet as Word document attachment by noon,  
Friday, September 14

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3] Monday, September 17                  discuss *Bull Durham*  
Martin and Ostwald + Chidester

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4] Monday, September 24                  Steven Spielberg, dir., *The Color Purple* (1985)  
(154 minutes)

assignment: 1) read Lewis  
2) prepare Lewis pre-discussion assignment sheet (#3)  
3) submit assignment sheet as Word document attachment by noon,  
Friday, September 28

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5] Monday, October 1                      discuss *The Color Purple*  
**Mythological, Theological, Ideological criticism;**  
ADAM MYTH

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6] Monday, October 8                      Hal Ashby, dir., *Being There* (1979) (130 minutes)  
QUIZ #2 (take home; due Friday)

assignment: submit Quiz #2 (take-home) as Word document attachment by noon,  
Friday, October 12 at the latest (due technically on Wednesday, October  
10)

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7] Monday, October 15                      discuss *Being There*  
ADAM MYTH; hope, memory, irony (part 2)  
myth as understood by Lewis + Martin and  
Ostwald

assignment: 1) read Crossan selections  
2) prepare Crossan pre-discussion assignment sheet (#4)  
3) submit assignment sheet as Word document attachment by noon,  
Friday, October 22

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8] Monday, October 25                      Woody Allen, dir., *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989)  
(104 minutes)  
QUIZ #3

assignment: 1) review Crossan + Lewis  
2) prepare structural analysis paper

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9] Monday, October 29                      discuss *Crimes and Misdemeanors*  
parable and myth as understood by Crossan

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Structural Analysis of *Being There* or *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

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10] Monday November 5                      The Coen Bros., dirs., *O Brother Where Art Thou?*  
(2001) (103 minutes)  
QUIZ #4

assignment: review "myth" in Crossan, Lewis, + Martin and Ostwald

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11] Monday, November 12            discuss *O Brother Where Art Thou*

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12] Monday, November 19            Terry Gilliam, dir., *12 Monkeys* (1995) (130 minutes)  
QUIZ #5

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13] Monday, November 26            discuss *12 Monkeys*

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Two-part Film Review and Critique

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14] Monday, December 3            Conclusion, Review, Take Home Quiz

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## SUMMARY OF DUE DATES

### September

7 Chidester pre-discussion assignment sheet (#1) by noon

10 Quiz #1 in class

14 Martin and Ostwald pre-discussion assignment sheet (#2) by noon

28 Lewis pre-discussion assignment sheet (#3) by noon

### October

12 Quiz #2 (take-home) by noon

22 Crossan pre-discussion assignment sheet (#4) by noon

25 Quiz #3 in class

29 Structural Analysis of *Being There* or *Crimes and Misdemeanors* in class

### November

5 Quiz #4 in class

19 Quiz #5 in class

26 Two-part Film Review and Critique in class

### December

11 Quiz #6 (take-home) by noon

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**ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES**

**Pre-Discussion Assignments**

Four "pre-discussion assignments" are scheduled during the course of the semester. The assigned questions will guide your reading and give you an opportunity to consider critically the arguments advanced by the authors—especially as those arguments relate to the films we will be viewing. All assignments are due at noon on the Friday before the next class meeting; they will receive less than full credit if submitted at a later time.

**Structural Analysis**

The purpose of this exercise is to explore the relationship between the form or structure of a film and its content—in particular, content that relates to our twin themes of religion and American culture. Part one of the exercise is to complete a "filmography" of one film (either *Being There* or *Crimes and Misdemeanors*), that is, a careful plotting of the action, events, and the dialogue as they develop in the film. Based on these notes (which are to be handed in as part of the exercise), you will compose a short (3 to 5 pages) essay in which you: 1] identify five or more key scenes in the film related to the theme you deem significant; 2] discuss the relationship among these scenes with particular emphasis on how they advance or undermine a "religious reading" of the film (using Chidester, Martin and Ostwalt, Lewis, Crossan, or other theorists to signal what you mean by "religious"); and 3] construct an argument, based on the evidence you have just presented, for the "essential," "basic," or "true" meaning of this particular film (in other words: based on your evidence, present your interpretation of the film).

**Critique and Review**

Go to <amazon.com> or <barnesandnoble.com> or, for those seeking a real challenge, go to an academic periodical. Find a review of one of the movies we have seen (a review that you find particularly interesting or disturbing); copy the review for inclusion with your essay; and write a brief (2-3 pages) critique of the review from the point of view of our class, that is: with specific reference to what the reviewer does and does not say about the role of "religion" in this particular film. Based upon (but not duplicating) your critique, write your own 2-3 page review of the same film. You may submit your review to amazon or barnes and noble if you wish, but do not forget to include with

your essay: 1] a copy of the review you are critiquing; 2] your critique of the review; 3] your review of the film.

## **Quizzes**

Six quizzes will be offered during the course of the semester. Of these, five will count toward your final grade. They will test your active viewing skills (recognizing themes, characters, plot, etc.) and your familiarity with the assigned readings. The in-class quizzes may be handwritten; the take-home quizzes should be typed and forwarded to me by the due date as e-mail attachments. Generally speaking, the take-home final quiz will be optional; however, you may wish to take the final quiz and substitute the grade for a quiz you may have taken earlier.

## **General Notes on Written Work**

- \* All writing should be TYPED and double-spaced.
- \* Recommended fonts include Courier, Palatino, Times, Bookman, and Century Schoolbook.
- \* Type size should be 10, 11, or 12.
- \* Margins on the paper should be 1 to 1 1/2 inches on the sides and 1 inch at the top and bottom.
- \* Papers longer than one page in length should have page numbers.
- \* A cover sheet should be stapled with the body of your paper. It should contain the following information:
  - 1) title of paper
  - 2) your name
  - 3) the date
  - 4) the course name and number
  - 5) the professor

For example, in the middle of the page:

No Guilt in a Godless World:  
*Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Magnolia* Contrasted

and in the lower right corner of the page:

Terri Mysteria  
December 7, 2007  
REL 124: Religion Observed in Popular Film  
Professor Trost

\* Papers with more than six spelling or grammar errors will be returned for revision prior to evaluation. Please use the spellcheck function on the computer and review your work to make certain that properly spelled words are in fact the words you intend to use (for example: be careful about the difference between "there" and "their" or "its" and "it's").

\* Papers with major construction problems will be returned for revision prior to evaluation. At the very least, make certain that your sentences are complete sentences (they have a subject and a verb) and that they express one (but not more than one) complete thought. There should be no run-on sentences.

\* If you have writing composition problems, you should consult one of the specialists at the Writing Center on the first floor in Morgan Hall. Your tuition pays for this kind of expert assistance.

\* Even if you have a facility with words, you may wish to sharpen your writing skills. In addition to the services of the Writing Center, I recommend:

- 1) Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, 6th Ed. (New York: Longman, 2007).
- 2) Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide*, 7th Edition (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).
- 3) John R. Trimble, *Writing With Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*, 2nd Ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000)

These books are available from <amazon.com> among other booksellers.