

SYLLABUS: COMM 323/RELST 323: Christian Theology and Film

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Office Hours T/Th 1:00 – 3:00 pm or by request

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Christian Theology and Film is a class devoted to exploring how the fields of Christian theology and film studies cross-fertilize each other, with special attention given to the ways in which film functions as religious discourse. Students will investigate the historical evolution of film as a means of communicating theological doctrines or Christian themes through its narrative patterns and to analyze how religious and secular films have been and are constructed as cultural texts that advise not only how one should live, but what one should believe. In particular, we will explore the sermonic nature of film, various hermeneutics of film, and how audiences receive and appropriate both manifest and latent religious meanings. The primary mode of focus for this course will be to trace decades of faith, decades of doubt, exploring how cinema reaffirms, subverts, or purifies one's dogmas and one's experiences.



What that means is that we will investigate how films tend to reaffirm one's belief system or how they tend to provoke doubt and questioning. Beyond this, we will also examine how each of us responds to film; how we interpret films through our own lenses or basic assumptions; and we fit their rhetorical messages into the web of beliefs that we hold. In particular, we will test the supportive or subversive impact of religious films to sustain faith or advocate doubt and how such encounters might encourage (or discourage) a discussion of such issues and values..

Prerequisites: three semester hours in Communications, English, History, Philosophy, or Religious studies.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

The generating purpose of this course is to enable the student to explore and analyze films that aspire to deal with religious and spiritual themes, images and subjects. The focus will be on those films that deal primarily with the Christian message and iconography. In aiding the student in sifting various hermeneutical approaches, we hope to provide the *cinéaste* in watching, interpreting, and critiquing film as religious discourse, as recommending particular aspects of "seeing" God or His competitors or those creatures made in His image, however smudged or bent.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:

After completing this course, the student should be able to

Discuss the nature, history, and scope of religious films and **explain** the functions they perform for diverse audiences/consumers.

Recognize, analyze, and discuss religious symbols, images, myths, rituals, themes, and codes as they appear and function in film.

Demonstrate an understanding of cultural variables (class, gender, and race) as they play in recreating religious faith in their own images.





Think critically about the relationship of personal faith to cinema, and **articulate** a theology, posture, and vision about the phenomenon of film.

Explain how personal faith and doubt are aided and abetted by film watching experiences; how film shapes, challenges, and disturbs one's beliefs about the world.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Flesher, Paul V. M. and Robert Torrey *Film and Religion* (Abingdon, 2007)

Lindvall, Terry *Sanctuary Cinema* (NYU Press, 2004)

Selected Readings in Theology and Film (VWC: Via Blackboard)



RECOMMENDED TEXTS:

Johnson, Robert: *Reel Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003)

Lindvall, Terry "Religion and Film: Part I, History and Pedagogy" (Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture, 2004) and "Religion and Film: Part II, Theology and Pedagogy" *Communication Research Trends* 24:1 (Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture, 2005)

Sanders, Theresa *Celluloid Images: Images of Sanctity in Film* (Mercer UP, 2002)

Schrader, Paul *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1972)

Smith, Joyce "The Ministry and the Message: What Americans See and Read about their Leaders" *Pulpit and Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership* (Durham: Duke Divinity School, 2003).



Selective websites:

http://www.cmu.ca/library/faithfilm.html#_blogs

<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>

<http://www.movieministry.com>

<http://www.metaphilm.com>

<http://www.faithnfilm.com>

<http://www.imdb.com/>

<http://www.artsandfaith.com/t100/>



COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Each student is required to read all assigned texts, articles and assigned materials before the due date. Each student is also responsible for all lectures and assigned media viewings, which implies, none too subtly, that students should attend all classes and participate actively in class discussions. Students should view at least one religious/redemptive film outside class each week.

Each student must review a **scholarly** article on religion and film, write one-page single spaced abstract, make copies of the abstract for other class members, and present the abstract orally. Articles from the online *Journal of Religion and Film* are acceptable. **Due September 25.**

Group Projects:



Students will come to class prepared to discuss a particular film. For the rest of the class, and



Students will form groups around cinematic portrayals of Jesus, review the film for the rest of the class, and discuss its basic theology and its impact on faith and doubt. **Due September 18**

Students will consult in groups to research, script, and make presentations on alternative visions of belief and doubt, exploring the faith systems of other traditions as seen through films. Students will organize around Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist religions. **Due November 27**

al Context Essay: Each student will research and write a short critical essay on how the films of a certain era reflected the religious climate of that period. **Due October 2**



Each student will write a critical and historical research paper on some significant relation of theology and film. For example, you may examine the film contributions of a particular denomination (Roman Catholic, Methodists, Baptists, etc.), analyze the treatment of film by a particular theological periodical (e.g. *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, etc.), explore the theological worldview of a certain director and its impact upon his/her films, investigate a particular theological doctrine or concept (e.g. transcendence vs. immanence) as it is imaged in film, or explore key religious themes in specific genres like the western or horror film. Your article should be designed for publication in a specified journal (such as the online *Journal of Religion and Film*), usually around 6-12 pages, following the rubric of an academic style sheet (e.g. MLA). Presentations may be done with PowerPoint or clips. **Due November 13.**

A quiz (**September 11**), a mid term (**October 9**) and a final examination (**TBA**) will be administered on readings, class lectures and discussions, and assigned films. Six key films (on Library reserve) must be viewed by the semester's end for the final examination. Half of the final examination will be an answer to the following questions: How do issues of personal faith and doubt (your own, your peers, your professor) shape your learning of a course on Theology and Film? What films challenge your beliefs or confirm your beliefs? What films provoke doubt or raise other questions for your own life? Or do they?



PROLEGOMENA SCHEDULE

- August 28 Prolegomena: Targum, Quadraga, and Finding Faith and Doubt in Films
 - Preview of Sanctuary Cinema
 - Toward the Kinetic Graven Image: St Augustine & St. John of Damascus
- The Icon and the Drama: Precursors to the Religious Cinema
 - Scenes from *La Dolce Vita*, *Andrej Rublev*, and *Home Alone*
 - Case Study: **The Seventh Seal** (Bergman, 1956)
 - Raising questions on issues of Faith and Doubt—in class essay



- September 4 *The Silents of God* & the Modern History of Film
 - How Early Silent Melodrama Films Propagated Victorian Values and How Westerns Transmuted Calvinist Doctrines
 - Scenes from *Hollywood Chronicles* & *A Drunkard's Reformation*
 - Case Study: **Broncho Billy's Sentence** and **Hell's Hinges** (Hart, 1916)

READ: Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema* (Chapters 1-2), Flesher "Intro" & Chapter 1

DUE: Quiz

QUESTIONS: What two primary influences does *Sanctuary Cinema* examine as sources of religious



responses to film? How did Bergman's film (Seventh Seal) reflect the ambivalence of the church toward these two forms? What is Targum?

What were the dominant representations of religious groups during the first two decades of silent American film (1896-1916)? How were clergy portrayed? What views of human nature appear in the character of the Western "good/bad" men like Broncho Billy and William S. Hart? What roles do the Bible and women play in their conversion narratives? What tropes do these films share?

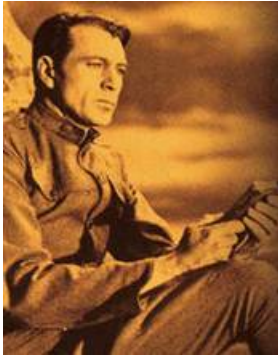


September 11 Progressive Era and the Transfer of the Sacred

Presbyterian Elder, Roman Catholic Imagination, and Visual Faith

Scenes from *Easy Street* (Chaplin, 1916) and *Sparrows* (Pickford, 1926)

CASE STUDY: **The Gaucho** (Fairbanks, 1928)



READ: Kuntz, Maria Elena de las Carreras, "Catholic Vision in Hollywood" *Film History* 14 (2002), 121-135; Shafer, Ingrid "Introduction: the Catholic imagination in popular film and television" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19: 2 (1991), 50-57; Blake, Richard "From Peepshow to Prayer: Toward a Spirituality of the Movies" *Journal of Film and Religion* 6: 2 (2002)

<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/peepshow.htm>

QUESTIONS: What do you see as the major differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant imaginations? On what side do you fall? What three considerations does Richard Blake want us to consider in reflecting upon religious films? Who is Andre Bazin and what did he see as the three types of religious films? What does he mean that films tap into our sense of myth? What does Blake mean by religious voyeurism and by a spirituality of the movies? Do you believe his statement: "Look at a movie, really look, and you will see the face of God?" Why or why not? What Catholic visions does Kuntz see in the Roman Catholic film directors?



Progressive Era reform movements, from Child Labor laws, Sabbatarianism, Temperance, and Women's Suffrage were prominent throughout the teens. How did the films of the day connect religion and such social reforms? How were cults and sects portrayed throughout the era? In what ways did films reaffirm the values of the Progressive reformers and in what ways did they subvert their motives? What impact did the Hollywood scandals have on religious responses to the film industry? Who was Will Hays and what were the prevailing attitudes towards him and the Jewish leaders of Hollywood? Was there any effect of the Fundamentalist/Modernist theological controversy on the film industry? How and in what ways did the Roman Catholic Church make its presence felt in the film industry? How was it able to become such a major force in censorship and industry guidelines?

September 18 The Shroud of Hollywood: Cinematic Faces of Jesus

Split God: The Divine/Human Tension

CASE STUDY: **Scenes from the Eucharist from Hollywood Jesus films**



READ: *Matthew* 26: 20-30; *Mark* 14: 12-26; *Luke* 22: 14-30; *John* 13-14; Flesher

5-7; Mahan's "Celluloid Savior" <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/celluloid.htm>

DUE: Group Reports on a Jesus film

QUESTIONS: How do the films about Jesus treat his divinity and humanity? How do they address issues of faith? In what ways do we see the beliefs or doubts of the filmmakers in their films? How do these films shape your understanding of Jesus and His ministry? Is faith or doubt dominant in your reading of these films? What similarities and differences do you see between the biblical texts on the Eucharist/Last Supper and the cinematic representations?

September 25 Faith and Doubt in the Great Depression

The Coming of the Code, Quenching of the Spirit, & Women in the Pulpit



Scenes from *Theodora Goes Wild* (Richard Boleslawski, 1936) and *Strange Cargo* (Frank Borzage, 1940)

The Miracle Woman (Frank Capra, 1931)

READ: Tibbetts, John “The Wisdom of the Serpent: Frauds and Miracles in Frank Capra’s *The Miracle Woman*” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 7 (1979), 393-407

DUE: Abstracts

QUESTIONS: What religious roles did women play in the cinema of the Golden Era? How did the legal codification of morality effect the representation of religious characters and issues? Did the law quench the Spirit of American cinema? Does Capra present a genuine miracle worker or a fraud? How were belief and doubt part of the suffering of the Great Depression? Do you think one or the other became dominant?

October 2: The Spectacle of Civil Religion in American History



Why We Believe and Fight

CASE STUDY: *Sgt York* (Howard Hawks, 1941)

DUE: Historical Context Essay

QUESTIONS: As American cinema began to emphasize historical dramas, how did religion fit in with American patriotism? How was Alvin York’s conversion scene instrumental in preparing Americans for war? How was Capra’s dark Christian allegory of John Doe helpful in establishing a realistic attitude toward life and death? In a time of war, how did Hollywood commodify the values of religion to bolster and uplift Americans at home and abroad? How did we discover that God was on our side? After the war, darker notions of human nature infiltrated Hollywood films. Not only were institutions corrupt, but all people were characterized by a moral ambiguity. What theological elements of darkness do we find in Capra’s Christmas movie? What aspects of theological doctrine correspond to the genre of *film noir*?



October 9: The Fifties and Biblical Blockbusters in the Secular City

Aliens, Religious Spectacles, and Covert Politics



CASE STUDY: *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954)

READ: Flesher Chapter 2-4; Ruppensburg, H “The alien messiah in recent science fiction films” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 14: 4 (1987), 159-166; Tomasulo, Frank “The Gospel according to Spielberg in *ET*” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 18: 3 (2001), 273-282

DUE: Midterm

QUESTIONS: How did biblical blockbusters and films like *The Robe* point to culture? Were true religious issues crowded out of the cinema? In what ways did the Social Gospel even if as an allegory, in *On the Waterfront*? In what ways were aliens viewed as a way to bring hope or judgment?

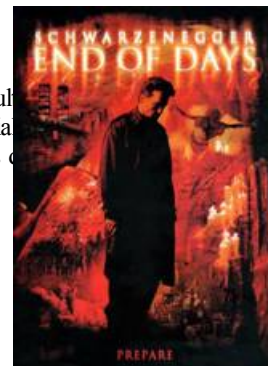


October 16: Hypocrisy and Deconstructing the False and Fear in Faith

CASE STUDY: *Elmer Gantry* (Richard Brooks, 1960)

READ: Flesher, Chapter 11; Steiner, M. “The Humiliation of the Faith: Representation and Evangelical Christianity in *The Apostle*” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 24: 1 (2001), 94-109

QUESTIONS: In what ways did the prosperity of the 1950s lead to a crisis of faith? Why did films seem to portray the darker, more fraudulent and hypocritical side of religion? How does one respond to the dominant sense of religious corruption on the screen?



October 23: Race and the Religious films of the Civil Rights Era

Issues of Representation

CASE STUDY: Clips of African-American films

READ: Lindvall, Terry. "Holy Architecture: Cinematic Images of the Church" *Beyond the Stars*, Volume 4 (Paul Loukides & Linda Fuller, eds.) (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State UP, 1993), 136-171; Reinhart's "Scripture on the Silver Screen" <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/scripture.htm>

QUESTIONS: How do the images of African-American Christianity differ from other portrayals of the church? In what ways is sex a key part of these representations? Why?

October 30: All Hallows' Eve: Evil, Theodicy, and Blood

Scenes from *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Left Behind*

CASE STUDY: **The Exorcism of Emily Rose** (Derrickson, 2005) or

Signs (M. Night Shambhala, 2002)

READINGS: Blake, R. A. "Redeemed in Blood: the sacramental universe of Martin Scorsese" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24: 1 (1991), 2-9 "Sanctification of Fear" <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/sanctifi.htm>

"Religious Film Fears" <http://www.quodlibet.net/kozlovic-fears2.shtml>

QUESTIONS: What is the face of evil in film? What is its source? Do cinematic representations of the devil and the demonic persuade of their existence or cast doubt on the whole realm? How did the existential crisis of the Death of God slip into mainstream movies? In what ways did religious faith creep into other genres, particularly horror? What is the religious significance of blood in Scorsese's films and in horror films?

November 6: Hagiographies and Saints of Sports

Scenes from *Amadeus*, *Bull Durham*, *Saving the Giants*, *Amazing Grace*

CASE STUDY: **Chariots of Fire** (Hugh Hudson/David Puttnam, 1981)

READINGS: Steiner, Mark "The Humiliation of the Faith: Representation and Evangelical Christianity in *The Apostle*" *Journal of Communication and Religion* 24: 1 (2001), 94-109

QUESTIONS: The latter parts of the 20th century and the early 21st century have been friendlier to religious movements as a whole? Why might this be? What films have captured your religious imagination? Do you distinguish between spirituality and religion? Does film help you do this?

November 13: Transcendental Style and the 1980s

CASE STUDY: **Ordet** (Carl Dreyer, 1955)

Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, *Tender Mercies* (Beresford, 1983)

READ: Desser, David "Transcendental Style in 'Tender Mercies'" *Religious Communication Today* (September 1985) 21-27; Hagen, W. M. "Shadowlands and the redemption of light" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26: 1 (1998), 10-15; Solomon, Martha "Villainless Quest" *Communication Quarterly* 31 (1983), 274-281; Review <http://www.artsandfaith.com/t100/>

DUE: Research Papers and Presentations

November 20: Research Day

November 27: Faith through Divine Comedy; The faith of children in the 1990s

Scenes from *Ponette*, *Simon Birch*, *Evelyn*, *Winn-Dixie*, *Millions*

CASE STUDY: “**Hollywood, Teach us to Pray**”

READ: Crouse, Edward E. “We Are Family--Perry Tyler” *Film Comment* (March/April 2006), 42-45; “The 10 Most Redeeming Films of 2006” ChristianityToday.com; Detweiler, Craig “Divine Comedy at the Cineplex” *Books and Culture* (February 27, 2006), Christianity Today.com; Moring, Mark “Make ‘Em Laugh” (June 25, 2007) Christianity Today.com

QUESTIONS: What is the relationship between religion and comedy? Can one laugh in the presence of God? Should one? Are certain religious traditions more open to various forms of laughter? How have various rituals (e.g. prayer) and characters (e.g. children) been represented in films?

December 4: Other Faiths, Other Films

READ: Flesher, 12-15

CASE STUDY: **Babette’s Feast** (Axel, 1987)

DUE: Group Projects on films of Different Religious Traditions

Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist

TBA: Apocalypse Now: Last Judgment and Final Examination