

RE 357 -- Jesus Christ Superstar: The Bible in Film
Spring 2009
M 7-9:30

Instructor: Carleen Mandolfo
Office: Lovejoy 346
Hours: M 4:00-5:15
W 1:00-2:15
Other hours by appt (I usually stay home and do
my own research on Fridays)
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Description

An examination of Hollywood's (and other filmmakers') obsession with retelling the stories of the Bible, beginning with De Mille's classic, *The Ten Commandments* through Gibson's controversial *The Passion of the Christ*, including films that range in interpretative expression from literal to metaphorical, the former being an attempt to "re-create" the story, the latter being an attempt to "re-interpret" the story. Students will also learn some basic film theory as well as some techniques for interpreting and reviewing film.

Texts

The Access Bible

Film, Form and Culture by Robert Kolker

Imaging the Divine by Lloyd Baugh

From Earth's Creation to John's Revelation by Green,
Mandolfo, and Murphy

Web reserves

Requirements

This course will be conducted seminar style. This means you are expected to contribute to the class discussion *everyday*. This requires three things from you: 1) that you are present in class; 2) that you have done the readings (and prepared written assignments) and seen the film; 3) that you have *thought* about the film.

Each movie we view will be "read" in two ways - as a work of narrative and visual art for its own sake, and secondly as an interpretation of particular biblical texts and religious traditions. You will be expected to view and then comment on each film critically with these two foci in mind. This means, for example, that you will need to

respond with more than "I liked this film a lot because it had great special effects." You will need instead to talk about how the special effects functioned to tell the story better (not that we will be watching many movies with exciting special effects!). More generally, you will be expected to comment on cinematography, editing, acting, etc. as well as the film's contribution to and reflection of both the culture in which it was produced, and the current context in which it is being viewed. For each film you will be expected to turn in a review of that film. I will give you questions to help guide you through this process.

Most of the "work" in this class will be done in teams. Each team is responsible to lead the discussion on two films throughout the semester. The rest of the class must also be prepared to discuss that film critically. This course should be a lot of fun, but don't expect it to be the same thing as a night at the movies. Film-making is a serious, and increasingly influential, artistic medium. We will read films in a way that requires the same critical attention (though somewhat different skills) as does reading literary texts.

As you can probably surmise, it is impossible to view an entire movie and have a discussion in one class period. At the same time, I do think it is important that we do some viewing as a group. So, you will be responsible to view all of the film but 20 minutes outside of class (obviously if you are the presenting group you must view it all, and usually all students want to view films in their entirety in order to write a more complete review). We will watch the last 20 minutes or so in class together and then hold our discussion.

Grading:

2 Group presentations	50% (25% each)
weekly reviews	30% (5% each)
Final paper or project	20%

Regarding participation, it is imperative that you come prepared to contribute each day. (Since we will meet very few times, missing even one day will constitute nearly 10% of the course).

As we all know, even non-experts have opinions about movies they've seen. We all enjoy discussing with our friends the merits or weaknesses of the latest blockbuster or "indie" film. Sometimes opinions are strongly held. When this is the case, discussions have the most potential

to be stimulating, fun, and instructive, so feel free to express your position strongly. I only ask that you respect other points of view, even as you disagree with them (which is more likely to happen when we're dealing with material related to the Bible). As with literature, film interpretation is not an exact science - every film is amenable to many ways of seeing.

Note on final paper/project: I am giving you the choice to do a final paper or a final group project. The paper will be straightforward - 8 pages reviewing what you consider to be the best/most interesting film you saw this semester (not one you already did an extensive review of. You can also pick one we haven't viewed, with my approval). You will engage all the critical film skills, as well as the biblical ones, you learned over the semester. You can't cover every angle of a film, so pick a thesis and develop it, but be sure that your review addresses the film as a biblical interpretation. If you'd rather do a project, you will need a group (at least three people). For this project you will develop a short film of your own. It must be on a biblical subject, but I will give you complete freedom in terms of how you choose to interpret that biblical subject or theme. Colby has all the technical equipment you will need. As with the final paper you will be expected to draw on the film and biblical reading skills you've developed during the semester. The film can be anywhere from 10-15 minutes long. If you decide to go this route, you will need to clear your project with me by Oct 31, and *will have to set up an appt with media services well before then to be tutored on the equipment.*

Course Schedule

- Feb. 9 Introduction and syllabus. Viewing:
"Visions of Light"
- Feb. 16 Biblical themes; "Visions of Light", cont.
Assgn: Read *From Earth's Creation to John's Revelation*. Come to class with a list of themes and the most important characters and events (as you see it) from both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament portion and the New Testament. These are themes that it would behoove you to be aware of as you move through this course. Also come to class with three questions that you would like clarified from the reading. Be prepared to turn in the assignment.
- Feb. 23 Practicing film analysis
Assgn: Kolker, chs. 2-3; bring in a clip that demonstrates an interesting cinematographic technique that you can discuss with the class for 5 minutes. Use the terminology used in the text to explain the clip you are showing.
- March 2 "East of Eden"
Assgn: Read Genesis 1-4; Kolker, ch. 4; Kreitzer, "East of Eden" (on web reserve)
- March 9 "The Decalogue": "Adultery" and "Murder"

Assgn: Read Deuteronomy 4-5,9; Gospel of John 8:1-20; Kolker, Intro and pp. 12-16; L. Baugh "A Christ Figure in Two Films of Kieslowski"

March 16 "Jesus Christ Superstar"
 Assgn: Read Gospel of Luke; Kolker, ch. 6
 M. Clark, "The Antiwar Movement" (on web reserve);
 L. Baugh "The Jesus Musicals"

March 30 "Jesus of Montreal"
 Assgn: Read John 1-5, 9-11, 17-21; Kolker pp. 211-221, 232-252, 255-261; L. Baugh, "A Film of Transition"

April 6 "The Last Temptation of Christ"
 Assgn: Read Gospel of Mark; L. Baugh "The Scandal Films"; Kolker, pp. 171-187
 *Clear final presentations with me

April 13 "The Passion of the Christ"
 Assgn: Read Matthew 21-28; Kolker, pp. 188-207;
 "The Jesus War" by Peter Boyer (on web reserve); "Nailed" by David Denby (on web reserve); "The Passion of Mel Gibson" by David Neff (on web reserve);
 A website with several articles from a Christian Perspective:
www.christianitytoday.com/movies/commentaries/passion-passionofmel.html

April 20 "Breaking the Waves"
 Assgn: Read Heath, S. "God, Faith, and Film: Breaking the Waves"
 (on web reserve); Mercadante, L. "Bess the Christ Figure?"
 Theological Interpretations of Breaking the Waves"
 (on web reserve)

April 27 "Apocalypse Now Redux"
 Assgn: Read Revelation to John 1, 7, 9, 12-14, 20-21;

C. Ostwalt, "Hollywood and Armageddon:
Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic
Presentation" (on web reserve); tba

May 4

Final presentations/discussions; loose ends