



# **THEOLOGICAL CRISES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN CINEMA**

**Dominican School of Theology and Philosophy,  
Rooms 1 & 2**

**Fall 2009, Tuesdays, 7:00-10:00 PM**

**J. RYAN PARKER**

**Office Hours by Appointment**

**Email [jamesryanparker@gmail.com](mailto:jamesryanparker@gmail.com)**

**or call 510-735-4111**



**Description:**

This course is a close study of pivotal films that chart the development of American cinema. Placing them in their socio-historical context, we will analyze production, distribution, censorship, exhibition, and audience reception and the ways in which these issues shaped and were shaped by gender, race, violence, sex(uality) and religious representations. Special attention will be placed on the religious and theological implications of these representations to see what changes have (or have not) taken place in the evolution of American cinema and social consciousness since that (in)famous, racist epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

**Word of Warning:**

Because this is a course that deals with film, some issues and texts studied may be offensive to some people in the class. Violence, graphic descriptions of sexuality, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, racism, explicit language, and sacrilege are regular parts of film, and will be part of some of the texts and examples discussed in class. It is the opinion of the instructor(s) that it is important for students of religion to engage these elements of popular culture rather than ignoring them or attempting to excise them from the course of study. It is hoped that feelings around these issues will spark passionate conversation and curiosity to understand even the most controversial elements of popular culture. If sensitivity to any of these issues is likely to cause excessive pain, discomfort, or inability to engage the material, please discuss this matter with the instructors, and consider whether this is the right class for you to take at this time.<sup>1</sup>

**Philosophy of Education:**

This course, and my philosophy of education in general, recognizes the very crucial, formative role that popular culture in general, and film in particular, plays in the construction of our worldviews. “Film” and “popular culture” are not monolithic, nebulous forces, but contain institutions and practices molded by real people with real agendas. While these agendas differ across time and social location, they are often shaped by and help shape motifs that inform what it means to be fully human. Throughout this course, the professor(s) and students will work to empower each other to confront this most influential power structure in order to be better consumers and interpreters of cinema in both our private lives and interactions with others. On the other hand, we will also be aware of how film and popular culture occasionally challenge another often-oppressive power structure, the church.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Through an analysis of four of American cinema’s most successful and/or controversial films and their changing production, distribution, censorship, and exhibition techniques, students will demonstrate a basic knowledge of American film

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Richard Lindsay for helping articulating this caveat.

history from the early 1900s to the present day through participation in the Film Clips Festivals and/or the option of writing a final research paper.

2. Students will demonstrate a basic knowledge of film theory and criticism through weekly assigned readings of prominent film scholars and critics and brief, in-class presentations on them or engagement with them through film clips.
3. Students will exhibit an ability to decipher the religious and theological implications of films through an analysis of the racial, gender, and religious representations in these films. In the completion of all the weekly assignments and the selection of a final project, students will be aware of these implications and should flesh them out in their work.
4. Students will exhibit an ability to engage members of their faith communities around the issues we discuss in class through the development of film studies curriculum appropriate to their congregational or para-church settings. Students who choose this track will present faith community discussion outlines on a selected film during our Film Clips Festivals. These students will also be able to compile a larger film study series as an option for their final project.
5. Students will strengthen oral and written communication skills through weekly in-class discussion groups and written assignments.

### **Requirements:**

1. Engaged class participation for all screenings, lectures, and discussions. Engaged participation involves having read and completed all assignments and bringing in thoughtful questions and comments about the assignments for in-class discussion. More introverted students can email such questions and comments to the professor(s) no later than one hour before each session. More than three absences will result in a failing grade. Rare exceptions will be allowed via consultation with the professor(s). **(10% of final grade)**
2. Personal biopic snapshot due the second week of class. For this assignment, provide a brief educational background of where and what you have studied and current research interests. Share your experiences with film, your likes and dislikes. Why did you take this class (be honest!)? What do you hope to get out of this class? This assignment should be no longer than three double-spaced pages, but no shorter than two. **(10% of final grade)**
3. Participation in the Film Clips Festival. Every third week, we will have a Film Clips Festival in which students can choose one of three ways in which to participate. (1) Students can offer a critical engagement with the series of readings assigned in between each festival (summarize, critique, and pose questions for the rest of the class). Again, ask yourself what the implications are for the ways in which we

- theologize or talk about religion. What do these readings contribute? (2) Students can bring in a film clip or clips that illustrate what we have discussed or read about in between each festival (Note: clips cannot come from movies already viewed or discussed in class). (3) Students can bring in an outline of a film discussion that they would lead in the faith community or ministry setting in which they participate or work. **(20% of final grade)**
4. A mid-term essay of no more than 7 pages that builds upon one of the festival assignments due the seventh week of class. This project can also serve as something of a bridge between the festivals and your final project. For this project, you should put assigned readings in conversation with each other or with outside sources. If you have used film clips, you might want to expand on that presentation. If you have begun to think about a film study series for a faith community, you can build on that by adding other films or fleshing out theological questions for discussion. **(20% of final grade)**
  5. A one-page proposal of final project or paper due the tenth week of class. This is a chance for you to begin thinking about your final project and a means for the professor to offer suggestions for sources. **(10% of final grade)**
  6. A final project, one of three options, due the final week of class. **(30% of final grade)**
    - a. Students can write a final research paper that offers an in-depth analysis of a selected film or films around issues that we have discussed in class. The four films that we watch together in class cannot be a part of this final paper. The final paper must engage both class readings and outside research should be from 18-25 pages in length. You should consult at least 10 sources in this paper.
    - b. Students can construct a 10-minute film composed of film clips that illustrates a particular theological theme (redemption, forgiveness, sin, etc.) or cinematic construct (race, gender, violence, etc.). If you choose a theological theme, think about ways in which the films you select mirror your faith community's understanding of this theme and the ways in which they challenge it. If you choose the latter, think about the ways in which the selected films mirror the larger understandings of or experiences of race, gender, violence, etc. and the ways in which they offer fresh, challenging perspectives. Again, the four films watched in class cannot be a part of this film. Students are highly encouraged to seek out clips that have not been used in class. A 6-page critical reflection that engages the assigned readings (at least four) should accompany the film.
    - c. Students can create a film studies curriculum appropriate to the faith-community or para-church setting in which they might work or worship. For example, a student may create a study around a particular theological tenet

that surfaces in several films, or she might create a resource for Hospice Ministries that engages films that deal with death and dying. The study guides/resources must contain enough material for a 6-week study guide. Each week should include a brief introduction to the film, a two-page critical reflection on the film (why it is included), and a list of 5 discussion questions for each film. Can you relate what we read and discuss to the larger faith community? Can you show your congregants or co-workers the value of engaging popular culture from a religious or theological standpoint beyond simply decrying nudity, violence, or foul language? This option can engage either assigned readings or outside research.

### Acceptable Outside Resources:

Academic texts are a first preference. Online journal articles from the likes of *The Journal of Religion and Film*, *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, etc. are also acceptable. Reviews from mainstream film critics from publications like *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and the like are acceptable as well. Blogs and other websites must receive approval from the professor(s). Wikipedia is a nice place to start for general background information but is not an acceptable source for citation in your midterms or final projects.

### Standards for Written Work:

All papers must be typed and double-spaced with one-inch margins on all sides. No handwritten papers will be accepted. In the top left corner, include the following information in block form: student name, class name or number, professor, and date. On every page except the first, put page numbers in the top right hand corner with your last name as a right-aligned header. Both hard copy and electronic submissions will be accepted.

Spelling and grammatical errors on papers will be marked or noted in track changes. **For every five spelling or grammatical errors, a half letter grade will be deducted from the final grade.** Students for whom English is a second language will not be penalized for incorrect grammatical errors, although they will be noted on the returned copy. Furthermore, **a letter grade per week will be deducted from any material handed in late.**

All material taken from written sources must be footnoted, even on short assignments. When referring to the title of a film or book, put it in italics.

Gender inclusive language is required for references to persons (human being, human person, man *and* woman, he *and* she, him *and* her, etc.). Gender inclusive language for God is encouraged although not required.

### Assessment Rubric for Written Work:

Grade	Presentation	Spelling/Grammar	Introduction	Argument	Conclusion
A					
B					
C					
D					

### Plagiarism

Plagiarism is using someone else's ideas, thoughts, words or methods of scholarship as if they were your own and without giving proper credit to that person. Proper credit is:

- When you use an actual sentence from a published or unpublished source, you must put it in quotation marks and give a footnote or parenthetical citation to indicate its origin. The citation should include full bibliographic information (consult MLA or Turabian handbooks).
- When you paraphrase or summarize another person's ideas, you must give them credit through footnotes or parenthetical citations.
- When you adopt a significant idea from someone else's work, you must provide footnotes or parenthetical citations.
- When you use a method devised by someone else, you must provide footnotes or parenthetical citations.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated. A first offense will result in failure of the assignment. A second offense will result in failure of the course. All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Academic Dean.<sup>2</sup>

### Required Readings:

All assigned readings will be included in a course reader or handed out.

### Screenings:

The four film screenings are of the utmost importance and will each count as a class meeting. On two occasions, the film screenings will consume the entire session or go over by several minutes. On the other occasions, we will enter into lecture/discussion at the end of the films. While all of these films are available on DVD for personal viewing, this course recognizes the importance of communal screening. Private re-viewings of these films are highly recommended though not required.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Pacific School of Religion's Plagiarism Policy, September, 12, 2007.

## SHOWTIMES

### SEPTEMBER 8, 2009: FADE IN

- Introductions
- Review of syllabus
- The Birth of Cinema and D.W. Griffith
  
- Introduction to Week 2
  - Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
  - Lindvall, Terry. "Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Church History and Film History." *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. Ed. Robert K. Johnston. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007. 126-142.

### SEPTEMBER 15, 2009: THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL MOTION PICTURE OF ALL TIME

- **Due: Personal Biopic Snapshot**
  
- Film Screening: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915, 187 mins.)
  
- Introduction to Week 3
  - Bernardi, Daniel. "Introduction: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema." *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*. Ed. Bernardi. Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996. 1-11.
  - Stewart, Jacqueline Najuma. "Introduction: A Nigger in the Woodpile, or Black (In)Visibility in Film History" and "Mixed Colors: Riddles of Blackness in Preclassical Cinema." *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005. 1-19; 50-90.
  - Taylor, Clyde. "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema." *Wide Angle* 13 (July-Oct. 1991). 12-30.

### SEPTEMBER 22, 2009: THE BIRTH OF A PASTTIME

**Topics for lecture and discussion: class, race, and the creation of the American movie audience.**

- Introduction to Week 4
  - May, Larry. "Revitalization: Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and the New Personality, 1914-1918." *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and*

*the Motion Picture Industry*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. 96-146.

- Basinger, Jeanine. *The Star Machine*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007. xiii-72.

## **SEPTEMBER 29, 2009: SILVER SCREEN, GOLDEN ERA**

**Topics for lecture and discussion: The transition to the studio system, the birth of celebrity, and trouble on the horizon.**

- Film Clips Festival
- Introduction to Week 5
  - Solomon, Jon. "Polyhymnia: The Old Testament." *The Ancient World in the Cinema*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 133-175.
  - Flesher, Paul V.M. and Robert Torry. "The Ten Commandments and America's Fight Against Tyranny." *Film & Religion: An Introduction*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. 71-93.

## **OCTOBER 6, 2009: LET MY PEOPLE GO!**

Film Screening: *The Ten Commandments* (1956, 220 mins.)

- Introduction to Week 6
  - Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp." Available from: <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>.
  - Krzywinska, Tanya. "Institutional Frameworks: Censorship and Regulation." *Sex and the Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006. 82-105.
  - Higashi, Sumiko. "The New Woman and Consumer Culture: Cecil B. DeMille's Sex Comedies." *The Silent Cinema Reader*. Ed. Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer. New York: Routledge, 2004. 305-317

## **OCTOBER 13, 2009: WHEN THE GOOD BOOK GOES BAD**

**Topics for lecture and discussion: subverting the code, sex and the cinema.**

- Guest lecturer, Richard Lindsay
- Introduction to Week 7
  - Hoberman, J. "Born to Be Wild: Outlaws of America, 1967-69." *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties*. 163-246.

**OCTOBER 20, 2009: SCREENING A REVOLUTION**

**Topics for lecture and discussion: the death of the studio system and the new revolution in filmmaking.**

**Due: Midterm Paper**

- Film Clips Festival
- Introduction to Week 8

**OCTOBER 27, 2009: NO CLASS—HAPPY READING WEEK****NOVEMBER 3, 2009: BEING BAD NEVER LOOKED SO GOOD**

**Topics for lecture discussion: the evolution of violence in American cinema**

Film Screening: *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, 112 mins.)

- Introduction to Week 9
  - Prince, Stephen. *Screening Violence*. Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 1-61.
  - Graham, David John. “Redeeming Violence in the Films of Martin Scorsese.” *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*. Ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. 87-95.

**NOVEMBER 10, 2009: NO CLASS—ANNUAL AAR CONFERENCE****NOVEMBER 17, 2009: IS THAT A GUN IN YOUR POCKET...?**

**Topics for lecture and discussion: continuing violence and the role of gender.**

- Introduction to Week 10
  - Vasey, Ruth. *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. 158-193, 264-269.
  - Shaheen, Jack G. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. New York: Olive Branch Press, 2009. 1-43.
  - Ramji, Rubina. “From *Navy Seals* to *The Siege*: Getting to Know the Muslim Terrorist, Hollywood Style.” *Journal of Religion and Film* 9 (October 2005).

**NOVEMBER 24, 2009: THE BIRTH OF THE BLOCKBUSTER**

**Topics for lecture and discussion: the return of the studio system(?), the emergence of the summer blockbuster, and the return of a new/old villain.**

- Film Clips Festival
- Introduction to Week 11

**DECEMBER 1, 2009: IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT**

**Due: One page final paper/project proposal.**

Film Screening: *Armageddon* (1998, 150 mins.)

- Introduction to Week 12
  - Noll, Mark. "The Intellectual Disaster of Fundamentalism." *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994. 109-145.
  - Ostwalt, Conrad. "Movies and the Apocalypse." *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2003. 157-188.

**DECEMBER 8, 2009: EVERYBODY LOOK BUSY, JESUS IS COMING**

**Topics for lecture and discussion: secular vs. sacred apocalypses.**

- Film Clips Festival

**DECEMBER 15, 2009: FADE OUT...**

- Presentations and submission of final papers/projects and potluck meal.

## Bibliography

- Abel, Richard. *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Carnes, Mark C. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.
- Chadwick, Bruce. *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.
- Detweiler, Craig. *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Francis G. Couvares, ed. *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006.
- Grievson, Lee. *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Henderson, Robert M. *D.W. Griffith: His Life and Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
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- Johnston, Robert K., ed. *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Mapp, Edward. *African Americans and the Oscar: Decades of Struggle and Achievement*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008.
- Marsh, Clive. *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology*. Paternoster, 2004.
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

- Noll, Mark. *The Civil War as Theological Crisis*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- Plate, S. Brent. *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Construction of the World*. London: Wallflower Press, 2008.
- . *The Religion and Film Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- , ed. *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Reinhartz, Adele. *Jesus of Hollywood*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Slide, Anthony and Edward Wagenknecht. *The Films of D.W. Griffith*. New York: Crown, 1975.
- Stewart, Jacqueline Najuma. *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Stokes, Melvyn. *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time."* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Vasey, Ruth. *The World According to Hollywood: 1918-1939*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Withall, Keith. *Early and Silent Cinema: A Teacher's Guide*. Bedfordshire, UK: Auteur, 2007.