

Religious Studies 113 Religion and Film

Fall, 2011
Buchanan 1940
T. Th. 3:30 – 4:45

Screenings: 6:30 – 9:20
Buchanan 1920

Richard D. Hecht, Professor
Office: HSSB 3076
Office hours: 1:00 – 3:00 or by
appointment
email: ariel@religion.ucsb.edu

Course Description:

Each time this course has been taught, we have selected a specific theme to organize our lectures, the selection of films and our classroom discussions. In the past we have studied themes like evil, dystopia and utopia, the hero's quest, redemption in the films of Clint Eastwood and Spike Lee, the frontier, and the representations of courage. The theme during this quarter will be the symbolism of the journey.

The journey is a powerful symbol in American history. There is always the frontier ahead of us and we are always going there or someplace. "Manifest Destiny," that particularly American idea and justification for our territorial expansion formulated in the mid-19th century, is essentially a description of a journey in which everywhere we set foot is a statement of both ownership and our identity. Of course, President Kennedy took up the "new frontier" in his acceptance speech before the Democratic Convention in the LA Sports Arena in 1960, saying that we stand "today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960s, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats. Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus." Among the particular symbolic structures which seem to be the locations of journeys are roads, paths, crossings, bridges, highways, and rivers.

American history could be framed by three major novels – Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884/85), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick or the Whale* (1851), and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). Granted that *The Wonderful Wizard* is seemingly the most lighthearted of the three, all three nevertheless occupy a crucial place in the canon of American literature. All three describe a journey – Dorothy's trip from Kansas along the yellow brick road, Ishmael's doomed expedition into the Pacific aboard the *Piquod* in search of the white whale, and Huck's voyage down the Mississippi River with Tom Sawyer. And, many commentators have suggested that each of these journeys functions as a metaphor for human intellectual and emotional growth. Journey also leads us to think of pilgrimage and the character of the pilgrim. Journey and pilgrimage also focuses our attention on places where one passes over from one realm unto another. We will argue that the symbolism of the journey reflects one of the most ancient

and omnipresent mythological narratives – the hero's quest, which Joseph Campbell made into the unifying theme of all myths. In short, the representations of the journey or the quest in film and literature are persistences of a fundamental mythological form. We will explore the representations of journey in a number of films where there are journeys through time, journeys from one place to another, and interior journeys which move us to consider our most important human values and also our worst vices.

But there is a larger issue in the symbolisms of journeys in film. Films, some interpreters might say, over much of the past century have had enormous difficulty interpreting religious experience or the religious dimensions of human life. In part, this difficulty was and is a reflection of cultural trends which were largely antagonistic toward religion in general. It should be remembered that the great social theorists, those whose thinking was shaped by various forms of Marxist thought or depth psychologies of the first half of the twentieth century, all believed that religion was the last remnant of superstition and that by the end of the century of rationalism, science, and social, technological, and economic progress would completely banish religion in modern societies. Of course, events of the last half-century have proven them wrong. Religion is very much alive in the 21st Century. Religion did not disappear and then come thundering back as a *revanche de dieu* but has always been present throughout American society and history. And, some might say that the increasing individual quests for new religions in the 1960s was a harbinger of things to come.

Religion remains woven in and through all societies of the past and the present. Religion is reflected in the various cultural expressions and practices of these societies, and especially in their arts. The feature-length, narrative film, one of the few art forms America can claim as her own, expresses and informs our religious experience through the stories it tells, the people (characters) it depicts, and the situations it portrays. In some cases these themes are explicit in film and other cultural works, but more often they are concealed, deeply coded, and implicit. Our task is to examine both dimensions. This will mean that we must see religion as much more than specific or particular religious traditions. We will argue that religion is about symbols which extend beyond the borders of the formulation and enactment of faith traditions. Myth is central to all religious traditions across all of history. Myth is a symbolic communication which expresses the deepest concerns of human life and provides orientation and meaning. The larger argument that unifies our exploration in this quarter is thus a cultural question. In what ways does film reflect the persistence of myth? Is film the functional equivalent or replacement for the traditional and historic role of myth in religion? And, if that might be the case, how can we speak of the viewing of film as a ritual or devotional experience?

Course Texts:

1. L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.
2. Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (BFI Film Classics).
3. Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*.
4. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*.
5. Peter Kramer, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (BFI Film Classics).
6. J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters, *The Big Lebowski* (British Film Institute Classics).

Course Requirements:

1. Careful preparation of all reading assignments and attendance in lecture.
2. You are required to view all the films that are screened in their entirety on Thursday evenings from 6:30 – 9:20 in Buchanan 1920. You may also view these films through other means, but they should be viewed concurrently with the full-length screenings. On Thursdays during class I will distribute to you questions which you are to answer during the screening or immediately afterward. These sheets or “Film Notes” will constitute 10 percent or 10 points of your course grade. **These film notes will only be available during the Thursday class session.** In addition to these complete screenings of films, we will show a number of shorter segments of other films in lecture, and you may wish to view these films in their entirety as is convenient for you.

At each class session I will select students to read their responses to questions from these film notes. If you are not in class when you are selected, you will be docked 5 points. If you are going to be absent from class because of a family emergency or another compelling appointment, you must inform me prior to the class that you will miss so that you are not called upon. At the mid-term and final exam you will turn in your film notes (simply stapled together) for the first half of the course and the second half of the course. You must turn in all the film notes to receive the points for this component of the course.

Please note that there will be two screenings at alternate times and these are noted in the syllabus.

3. There will be an essay mid-term on Thursday, 20 October. This examination will count as 30 percent or 30 points of your final course grade.
4. A essay final examination on Thursday, 8 December. The final examination will be worth 60 percent or 60 points of your final course grade.

Films and Reading Assignments:

First Week (22 September)

Reading Assignment: L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Film: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) – directed by Victor Fleming, Mervyn LeRoy (uncredited), and King Vidor (uncredited); from the novel by L. Frank Baum and screenplay by Noel Langely, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allen Woolf.

Films to be used in-class: *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), from the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis and screenplay written by Paul Schrader, directed by Martin Scorsese. *The Exorcist* (1973), from the novel by William Peter Blatty and screenplay written by William Peter Blatty, directed by William Friedkin.

Second Week (27-29 September)

Reading Assignment: Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* and Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (first third)

Film: *Easy Rider* (1969) – directed by Dennis Hopper; written by Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, and Terry Southern.

Films to be used in-class: *Two for the Road* (1967), screenplay written by Frederic Raphael and directed by Stanley Donen and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), screenplay adapted from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of Rings* by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and Peter Jackson, and directed by Peter Jackson.

Please note that there will be no lecture on Thursday, 29 September. However, the screening will take place at the assigned time.

Third Week (4-6 October)

Reading Assignment: Kramer, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Film: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – directed by Stanley Kubrick; screenplay written by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick.

Films to be used in class: *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), screenplay written by Phil Kaufman and Sonia Chernus, and directed by Clint Eastwood and *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978), screenplay adapted from Robert Stone's novel *Dog Soldiers* by Judith Rascoe and Robert Stone, and directed by Karel Reisz.

Fourth Week (11-13 October)

Reading Assignment: Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (second third)

Film: *Five Minutes of Heaven* (2009), screenplay written by Guy Hibbert and directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel.

Film to be used in class: *Sorcerer* (1977), screenplay adapted from Georges Arnaud's *The Wages of Fear* by Walon Green and directed by William Friedkin.

Fifth Week (18-20 October)

Reading Assignment: Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (finish).

Film: *Everything is Illuminated* (2005), screenplay adapted from Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* by and directed by Liev Schreiber.

* Mid-term examination on 20 October

Sixth Week (25-27 October)

Reading Assignment: Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, pp. 1-122.

Film: *Dead Man* (1995), screenplay written by and directed by Jim Jarmusch.

Films to be used in class: *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), screenplay written by Ryuzo Kikushima, Hideo Oguni, Shinobu Hashimoto and Akira Kurosawa, and

directed by Akira Kurosawa. *Lord Jim* (1965), adapted from Joseph Conrad's novel, *Lord Jim*, by Richard Brooks and directed by Richard Brooks.

Seventh Week (1-3 November)

Reading Assignment: J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters, *The Big Lebowski*

Film: *The Big Lebowski* (1998), screenplay written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen and directed by Joes Coen.

Eighth Week (8-10 November)

Film: *Incendies* (2010), screenplay written by Denis Villeneuve from the play by Wajdi Mouawad and directed by Denis Villeneuve.

Film to be used in class: *Nostalghia* (1983), screenplay by Andrey Tarkovskiy and Tonino Guerra, directed by Andrey Tarkovskiy.

Ninth Week (15-22 November)

Reading assignment: *Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling*, pp. 123-259.

* Film: *La Rafle* (2010), screenplay written by and directed by Rose Bosch to be screened on Wednesday, 16 November.

Regular Thursday evening film screening: *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), written and directed by Stephen Elliot.

Film to be used in-class: *Apocalypse Now Redux* (1979/2001), screenplay by John Milius, Francis Ford Coppola, Michael Herr, based on the uncredited novella by Joseph Conrad, and directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

Tenth Week (29 November – 1 December)

Review all reading assignments.