

Religion and Film: The Cinematic as Experience, Ritual, Metaphysic, and Symbol

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RS 311, Religion and Film

This course could in all likelihood be the most relevant, thought provoking, and entertaining you will ever find rolled into a single college course. If you enjoy watching movies, impressing your friends with new and sexy concepts (whether at cocktail parties, health club, church, mosque, synagogue, or ashram), and hanging out on computers, then this course is for you. The class will be conducted entirely online in place of regular class meetings.

The baseline premise for this course is that there are untold treasure troves of religious significances hidden in aspects of everyday culture. Nowhere is this more apparent to the initiated than in movies. In many ways movies keep the mythic dream-factory of *homo religiosus* (i.e., the hyper-symbolic metaphysical potentials within humans) alive with ever-new, yet ever-returning images. As formulators of our worldviews, or refractors and reflectors of reality, movies constitute much of our vocabulary, script our personalities, and/or form the backdrops and soundtracks of our lives. In this course we focus upon cinema as evidence of the tenacity of religious paradigms in contemporary culture. The range of our considerations will include everything from primary religious literature as encoded in scripture, in the deep-structure religious paradigms at the core of cultures, and on through to classic and contemporary fiction as translated into cinema, all as a way of doing "cultural archeology." Our aim is to unearth various strata of religious themes, dimensions, insights and/or phenomena embedded there. The argument and exploration of this course will be based on the premise that "in the history of religions there are only documents and interpreters." We will test that premise over a vast span of literary genres and cinematic works in the context of contemporary social and literary multi-culturalism. Such themes as the identity and purpose of humanity, the problems of suffering, ethics, the quests for ultimate meaning, significance, authenticity, and transcendence; the prophetic critiques of society and power; horror and the holy, wisdom, courage, destiny, providence, and the silence of God will be among the topics of focus in this course.

Student Learning Outcomes

You will learn:

- How religious paradigms, even when apparent adherence to any concrete tradition seems to be absent, influence artistic probings of the human condition, existence, and transcendence.
- To recognize the discrete and particular tenets borrowed from or analogous to a wide variety of religious phenomena reflected in a vast array of the world religions.
- To recognize “paradigms in motion” and to identify and isolate their trajectories along the trace-trails of their origins, incubation zones, intersections of transmission, pivotal junctures, and resting repositories.
- To utilize elementary terms, tools and techniques of contemporary theories of cinematic interpretation.
- New ways to talk about "religion" and "the religious" particularly in regards to cinema but as well in the larger context of contemporary culture as expressed in media, art, music, films, politics, sports, and public discourses on science.
- To become fluent, or at least conversant, in a variety of diverse religious values, paradigms, patterns, and practices as they manifest in multiple literary genres such as myths, scripture, epics, sagas, folk tales, fairytales, short stories, novels, poems, songs, movies, plays and other narrative vehicles such as jokes and anecdotes.
- To become a much more interesting human being, global citizen, and conversation partner whether as a participant at a party or an executive retreat, whether as a poet, priest, politician, pedagogue, patron of the arts, PTA president, or simply a lifelong learner.
- To understand and interpret everything you just read.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World by S. Brent Plate;
Publisher: Wallflower Press (March 16, 2009; **ISBN-13:** 978-1905674695

Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal
 by Jeffrey Kripal; University Of Chicago Press; Reprint edition (December 21, 2015)
 ; ISBN 978-0226271484

Esoteric Hollywood:: Sex, Cults and Symbols in Film by Jay Dyer;
Publisher: Trine Day (December 22, 2016); **ISBN-13:** 978-1634240772

VIDEOS (to be viewed): You will naturally have to view movies which will primarily have to be rented from a video provider such as Netflix or Amazon, though some may be available in libraries, on cable, or online, and even at movie houses and cineplexes. I will post either the particular video I want you to watch or the type of genre of video I would like you to pursue in an appropriately timely fashion. Here are some examples of the types of movies I have in mind. *The Matrix; Jesus of Montreal; Babette's Feast; Harry Potter; The Lord of the Rings; The Chronicles of Narnia; Ordinary People; The Milagro Beanfield War; Being There; Interview with a Vampire; The Fountain; The Tree of Life; The Day the Earth Stood Still; Avatar; 2001: A Space Odyssey; 12 Years A Slave;* and even whole TV series such as *TrueBlood; Lost,*

Breaking Bad, Dexter etc...

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Reading assignments, Bulletin Board postings, and other web-based participation, such as Collaborate sessions. This writing intensive course will require a mid-term examination, one term paper on a relevant topic of your choice, one final-examination, and, of course, good mental hygiene. All reading assignments will be posted in a timely fashion.

THE TERM PAPER: The major topic of your paper will pertain to the main course subject, "Religion and Film." However, within that large, over-arching umbrella, the particular choice of paper topics has a wide range of flexibility in the hopes that the students will pursue subjects that command their interests and spark their imaginations. You will want to begin exploring possible topics from practically the beginning of the course and should not only feel free but consider it a necessary step in your preparation to consult the instructor concerning your topic. Various strategies for generating a viable topic are discussed on a webpage appropriately titled "The Research Paper" on our course page. As upper division students, you are naturally expected to write a much more expansive research paper than lower division students due to your advanced sophistication and greater academic preparation.

Assignments and grading criteria: Preparation and class participation are factored into the grading. Some real-time class meetings may be scheduled online at various times to accommodate a variety of schedules but will be made available as archives. Most of the work, however can be posted at your convenience. Thoughtfulness and preparation in your interaction with the thoughts and postings of your fellow classmates will make your sojourn through "Religion and Film" a much richer experience than you will have had in a traditional course. As a participant in this course, you become part of the course. This cannot be emphasized enough. The mid-term accounts for approximately 20% of your grade, the final about 20%, and the research paper 20% with 40% based on class participation (Bulletin boards and web assignments).