Th45 Special Topic: Faith and Film
Spring 2002

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St. Anselm College
Poisson—Rm. 106
Tuesday—6:00-8:30 P.M.

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Required Texts:


Recommended Text:


Course Description: Faith and Film (Th45) is a course that explores theological themes, symbols, motifs, and images through screenings of American and foreign films. Cinematic techniques are incorporated into the design of the course as they pertain to the theological and existential purposes of the director. Students are required to analyze the films viewed in class, give oral presentations, and compose papers and annotated bibliographies on selected films.
Students are also required to view several films outside of class. Among the films selected for the course are the following: The Piano, Life Is Beautiful, A Midnight Clear, Babette's Feast, Contact, La Strada, Awakenings, Dead Poets' Society, The Apostle or Sling Blade, Cinema Paradiso, The Sacrifice, etc.

**Course Objectives:** The following are the instructor’s goals for students in the course and serve as the foundation of an ongoing process:

1. To introduce you to several of the major categories/themes of theological inquiry through the medium of film.
2. To explore with you the film content (and, to a limited extent, film style/technique) in terms of the theological implications of plot, symbols, character development, values, and underlying or explicit religious themes/traditions.
3. To achieve the above objectives through open discussion and critiques, using selected short readings from religious studies and/or "modified lectures" (short, informal talks) to introduce most of the films.
4. To encourage you to consider various interpretations of reality ("that willing suspension of disbelief") as presented in the films.
5. To elicit from you the possible solutions to a moral dilemma and your evaluation of a character’s ethical decision as well as the wider implications of a particular moral-ethical position through your developing receptivity, critical reason, intuitive insight, research skills, etc.
6. To encourage you to perceive theology/religious studies as a speculative, creative, and critical academic enterprise (this is how scholars of religion practice their discipline, even if they work within a given doctrinal system).
7. To demonstrate through discussion of examples within the films (or from your own and the instructor’s experience) opportunities for grace or greater conscious awareness in the world, even in the midst of strife or suffering.
Graded Assignments:

**Oral Presentation:** Each peer group will research and give a presentation on an assigned film. The presentation will be scheduled for a designated date in the syllabus and should be approximately 30 minutes. Think of the project as you would the design of a paper. Have a clear focus or thesis statement, and discuss elements of the film that support your thesis. Select a thematically interesting or compelling aspect of the film and relate the symbolism, narrative structure, and/or character development to your chosen thematic focus. Other aspects of the film may be included, such as cinematic techniques. You may also show a film clip of 5-6 minutes to demonstrate or highlight a concept in your presentation, making the total presentation a maximum of 35 minutes.

**Literature Review/Annotated Bibliography:** Each peer group will prepare an annotated bibliography of at least 12 sources pertaining to the film presented. You may use one Internet site, but I want you to explore other kinds of sources, also—books on film criticism (see our library catalogue), journal articles (see the film journals in our library catalogue), the Bible, classic works of literature, theology, philosophy, related films, etc. However, if you have several examples of 5 types of sources in your bibliography, you may include additional Internet sources. The annotated bibliography should be typed in the MLA format and submitted on the day of the scheduled presentation. Consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th edition (1999) for the appropriate forms used to cite various kinds of sources. Each bibliographic entry should be accompanied by an annotation of 8-10 complete sentences summarizing the content and point of view of the source; the annotation should be descriptive rather than evaluative. A student sample of an annotated bibliography will be provided.

**Critiques:** Two 2-3 page, typed critiques are due on the designated dates. The instructor will provide a focus question for each critique on the day of the screening. In order to fulfill the assignments, students must attend class. Students might want to view the film a second time in the library before submitting the critique.

**Critical/Analytical Paper:** Early in the course, begin to develop a topic within the sphere of religion and film that is deeply interesting or challenging to you. Narrow the topic appropriately and research it, utilizing the bibliography provided by the professor and/or the various sources and references included in the assigned texts as well as the library catalogue, Internet sites, periodical literature (including film reviews), etc. Write a critical paper in which you analyze a film in relation to the theological/religious/existential themes and related issues (or a dimension thereof). Keep in mind that the themes in the films studied need not be expressly religious in order to qualify as suitable material; the humanistic and existential aspects of a film may also be considered...
in your treatment of the subject. In regard to any topic, you must take a
critical, analytical approach based on formal research combined with your own
insights, knowledge, and observations. The length of the paper should be 7 or 8
pages (typed/double spaced), and the paper should follow the 1999 MLA style
for format and parenthetical documentation. Include a complete bibliography
(called Works Consulted) in addition to your Works Cited. The due date of the
research paper will be arranged by asking you to sign up for one of three due
dates on a handout the professor will circulate.

Blackboard Discussion Forum: Each student is required to enter responses to
questions posed by the instructor as well as to classmates’ comments on the
course web site Discussion Board. The questions are available in the web site
following each film screening. This requirement is an integral dimension of the
course and will extend the discussions of each film considerably. You may enter
additional comments about a particular film at any time during the course. The
instructor will respond to individual comments either on the Discussion Board or
by e-mail.
**Attendance:** The college expects students to attend every class meeting. For serious reasons (e.g., illness or a death in the family), a student may be excused from class if documentation is provided. Class discussion comprises a substantial component of the course grade. Two *unexcused* absences will lower your final course grade five points, and each absence thereafter five additional points. Also, an absence from class does not constitute an extension for an assignment, unless there is a serious reason. Late assignments will be docked one full letter grade for each day they are late. Whenever possible, students should call the professor's office if an absence from class is anticipated. I will check my voice mail and e-mail for messages before each class.

**Grading Scale:** A = 94-100; A- = 90-93; B+ = 87-89; B = 83-86; B- = 80-82; C+ = 77-79; C = 73-76; C- = 70-72; D+ = 67-69; D = 63-66; D- = 60-62; E = 59 and below.

**Final Course Grade:** The final grade for the course will be based on the student's performance in the following areas: class participation--discussion of the films/texts and engagement with the course content (15%); oral presentation (15%); annotated bibliography (15%); research paper (30%); and two critiques (25%).

**Plagiarism:** Academic honesty is essential and will be penalized by the professor’s refusal to accept a paper that is plagiarized; a failing grade in the course may also be assigned. The rules governing academic honesty will be fully explained in class, in particular, paraphrasing, quoting, and documenting published material as well as group participation.

**Consultation:** I welcome the opportunity to talk with you about your academic interests and the course assignments during my office hours or by appointment. And I invite you to suggest ways of making the course an enriching experience for you.

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Films for Final Paper

The following are films from which to select a subject of study. The films viewed in class are not eligible for the oral presentation and your final paper. Please consult the Geisel Library catalogue for additional films that have been ordered for this course. If you have a favorite film you wish to research, please see me.

A Man for All Seasons
Apocalypse Now
Empire of the Sun
Ikiru (To Live)
Citizen Kane
Schindler’s List
The Mission
The Black Robe
Wings of Desire
Platoon
Stairway to Heaven
It's a Wonderful Life
The Touch
Virgin Spring
Fanny and Alexander
Midnight Cowboy
The Thin Red Line
The Right Stuff
The Seventh Seal
The Gospel According to
Saint Matthew
The Last Temptation of Christ

The Shawshank Redemption
To Kill a Mockingbird
Brother Sun, Sister Moon
The Age of Innocence
Dead Man Walking
Slaughterhouse-Five
Wild Strawberries
Diary of a Country Priest
I, the Worst of All
Chocolat
The Killing Fields
Philadelphia
The Razor's Edge
American History X
The Crucible
Burnt By the Sun
The Green Mile
The Spitfire Grill
Jesus of Montreal
Romero
Lorenzo's Oil
**Examples of Themes or Categories in Theology and Film**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Healing/death and dying</strong></td>
<td>Lorenzo’s Oil, Tender Mercies, Little Buddha</td>
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<td>Resurrection</td>
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<td>The Spitfire Grill</td>
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<td>Therese</td>
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<td>Cries and Whispers</td>
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<td><strong>Reconciliation</strong> (or absence thereof)</td>
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<td>Amadeus</td>
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<td>The Mission</td>
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<td>The Chosen</td>
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<td>Dead Man Walking</td>
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<td>Ordinary People</td>
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<td>Babette’s Feast</td>
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<td>The Apostle</td>
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<td><strong>Theological pluralism/clash of theologies</strong></td>
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<td>Romero</td>
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<td>The Mission</td>
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<td>Resurrection</td>
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<td>Gandhi</td>
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<td>Brother Sun, Sister Moon</td>
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<td>The Black Robe</td>
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<td><strong>Suffering and compassion</strong></td>
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<td>La Strada</td>
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<td>Romero</td>
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<td>Dead Man Walking</td>
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<td>Schindler’s List</td>
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<td>Tender Mercies</td>
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<td><strong>Comparative religion</strong></td>
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<td>Little Buddha</td>
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<td>Gandhi</td>
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<td>The Chosen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kundun</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social justice/injustice</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
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<td>Romero</td>
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<td>The Mission</td>
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<td>Dances with Wolves</td>
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<td>Life Is Beautiful</td>
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<td>Sophie’s Choice</td>
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<td>Philadelphia</td>
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<td><strong>Violence vs. non-violence</strong></td>
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<td>(context of structural evil)</td>
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<td>Romero</td>
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<td>Gandhi</td>
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<td>The Mission</td>
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<td>A Midnight Clear</td>
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<td>Empire of the Sun</td>
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<td>Kundun</td>
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<td>Born on the Fourth of July</td>
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<td>The Killing Fields</td>
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<td><strong>Apocalypticism</strong></td>
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<td>The Seventh Seal</td>
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<td>Apocalypse Now</td>
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<td>Resurrection</td>
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<td>The Sacrifice</td>
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**Selected Bibliography**

Please go to the Geisel Library online catalogue and the Reserve Desk for titles of many additional books and periodicals on film as well as video resources that have
recently been added to the collection. Also check the External Links on Blackboard, where web sites are posted.


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Schedule of Classes and Reading Assignments

Jan. 15—Introduction to the course; **Film**: *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*

Jan. 22—**Film**: *The Messenger* or *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*; **Texts**: *Explorations* 9-43 (Part One); *New Image* 151-160 (Gallagher)

Jan. 29—**Texts**: *New Image* 57-71 (Malone); *Explorations* 115-139 (Telford); **Film**: *A Midnight Clear*.

Feb. 5—**Film**: *La Strada*; **Texts**: *New Image* 197-212 (White); *New Image* 95-110 (Bleeckere);

Feb. 12—**Film**: *The Piano*; **Texts**: *New Image* 111-127 (Apostolos-Cappadona); *Explorations* 47-58 (Rhoads and Roberts); *Gospel of Mark*; **Critique # 1 due**

Feb. 19—**Film**: *Babette’s Feast*; **Texts**: *Explorations* 207-218 (Marsh); *New Image* 131-150 (Marty)

Feb. 26—**Film**: *Life Is Beautiful*; **Text**: *New Image* 161-177 (Verbeek); web site readings (to be posted on Blackboard)

**Spring Recess**

Mar. 12—**Film**: *Awakenings*; **Text**: *Explorations* 97-113 (Maher); web site readings (to be posted on Blackboard)

Mar. 19—Web site readings (to be posted on Blackboard); **Presentations (2)**

Mar. 26—**Film**: *Sling Blade* or *The Apostle*; **Text**: *New Image* 72-91 (Zwick); **Presentations (2)**

Apr. 2—**Film**: *Dead Poets’ Society*; **Texts**: *Explorations* 167-180 (Brie and Torevell); **Critique # 2 due**

Apr. 9—**Film**: *Contact*. Last date for submission of critical paper.

Apr. 16—Surveying the Themes of the Course; **Presentations (2)**

Apr. 23—Surveying the Symbolism of the Course; **Film**: *The Sacrifice*; web site readings (to be posted on Blackboard)

Apr. 30—Wrapping Up; **Presentations (2)**
Print Journals and Internet Sites

Journals

* Cineaction
* Cineaste
* Literature/Film Quarterly
* Film Quarterly
* Premiere
* Sight and Sound
* Journal of Religion and Film http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/

A Few Web Sites (additional web sites are posted in External Links of Blackboard)

* Strictly Film School http://www.filmref.com/
* Andrei Tarkovsky Web Site http://www.filmref.com/directors/dirpages/tarkovsky.html#sacrifice
* Coming Attractions by Corona http://www.corona.bc.ca/films
* The Greatest Films http://www.greatestfilms.org/

Note: The professor strongly encourages you to keep a film journal of your impressions and interpretations throughout the course.