

## Th45 Special Topic: Faith and Film Spring 2002

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

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### **Required Texts:**

*Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning.* Ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

*New Image of Religious Film.* Ed. John R. May. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997.

### **Recommended Text:**

Giannetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies.* 8th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999. (reserve desk)

**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*, 5<sup>th</sup> 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*  
*I kiru (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

### Healing/death and dying

*Resurrection*  
*The Spitfire Grill*  
*Therese*  
*Cries and Whispers*

### Reconciliation (or absence thereof)

*Amadeus*  
*The Mission*  
*The Chosen*  
*Dead Man Walking*  
*Ordinary People*  
*Babette's Feast*  
*The Apostle*

### Theological pluralism/ clash of theologies

*Romero*  
*The Mission*  
*Resurrection*  
*Gandhi*  
*Brother Sun, Sister Moon*  
*The Black Robe*

### Violence vs. non-violence (context of structural evil)

*Romero*  
*Gandhi*  
*The Mission*  
*A Midnight Clear*  
*Empire of the Sun*  
*Kundun*  
*Born on the Fourth of July*  
*The Killing Fields*

*Lorenzo's Oil*  
*Tender Mercies*  
*Little Buddha*

### Suffering and compassion

*La Strada*  
*Romero*  
*Dead Man Walking*  
*Schindler's List*  
*Tender Mercies*

### Comparative religion

*Little Buddha*  
*Gandhi*  
*The Chosen*  
*Kundun*

### Social justice/injustice

*To Kill a Mockingbird*  
*Romero*  
*The Mission*  
*Dances with Wolves*  
*Life Is Beautiful*  
*Sophie's Choice*  
*Philadelphia*

### Apocalypticism

*The Seventh Seal*  
*Apocalypse Now*  
*Resurrection*  
*The Sacrifice*

## 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.

Alyn, Marc. "God in Contemporary Literature." In *New Questions on God*. Ed. Johannes Metz. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.

*Art as Religious Studies*. Ed. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. New York: Crossroad, 1987.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin Books, 1971.

Blizel, Bill, and Ronald Burke. "The Apostle: An Interview with Robert Duvall." *The Journal of Religion and Film* 2.1 (1998). 26 June 2001.  
><http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/apostle.htm><.

Dalle Vacche, Angela. *Cinema and Painting: How Art Is Used in Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

Dart, John. "Film Comedy: A Way to Religion?" *The Los Angeles Times* 3 Dec. 1972, Sec. C: 1.

Detweiler, Robert, ed. *Art/Literature/Religion: Life on the Borders*. Chico: Scholars Press, 1983.

Dillenberger, John. *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Church and the Visual Arts*. New York: Crossroad, 1986.

Dirk, Tim. Review. *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Complete Academy Awards History: From 1927 to the Present. 26 June 2001.  
><http://www.greatestfilms.org/etth.html><.

Ferrell, William K. *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology*. Westport, CN: Praeger, 2000.

Fraser, Peter. *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film*. Westport, CN: Praeger, 1998.

Kael, Pauline. *Deeper Into Movies*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973.

Langer, S.K. *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

Lauder, Robert E. *God, Death, Art & Love: The Philosophical Vision of Ingmar Bergman*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989.

Otto, Rudolph. *The Idea of the Holy*. Trans. John W. Harvey. Oxford University Press, 1923.



*The Oxford History of World Cinema.* Ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Oxford:  
New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

*Religion in Film.* Ed. John R. May and Michael Bird. Knoxville: University of  
Tennessee Press, 1982.

Scholar, Jean. "Kierkegaard at *Babette's Feast*: The Return to the Finite."  
*Journal of Religion and Film* 1.2 (1997). 10 January 2002.  
><http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/kierkega.htm><.

*Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film.*  
Ed. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. Boulder: Westview Press,  
1995.

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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>
- \* The Films of Ingmar Bergman <http://www.mason-west.com/Bergman/index.shtml>
- \* 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.