

**Contents**[Course Description](#)[Required Books](#)[Course Requirements](#)[Topics and Reading Assignments](#)[Pedagogical Reflections](#)

Myth, Ritual, and the Creative Process

Instructor

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Institution

Alfred University
 A small comprehensive university with private sector Liberal Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering Colleges and public sector (SUNY) College of Ceramics with Schools of Art and Design and Ceramic Engineering.

Course Level and Type

This is a seminar course, usually taken by juniors and seniors. About 1/4 of the students are Comparative Cultures Majors and about 1/2 are students from the School of Art and Design. The requirements for the course are either a previous course in religious studies or the Philosophy of Art course.

Hours of Instruction

56 hours, 4 hrs/week over 14 week semester. The class meets for a two hour period twice a week.

Enrolment and Last Year Taught

Course taught once a year. Regularly enrolls between 18-22 students. 19 students Fall semester 1997.

Course Description

In this seminar we will engage in a cross cultural examination of how diverse peoples establish their worlds by narrating stories and by acting out their deepest aspirations and beliefs. The central question of the course: How and why are symbolic frameworks transmuted from certain forms to others through the creative imagination? Special attention to masking will help focus on "image" at the point where ritual and myth intersect with the performing and visual arts. Masking is also a place where identity and culture meet; it therefore raises the question about how the creative process is both a personal and social phenomenon.

As an upper division seminar, the course requires serious commitment and active engagement. Ideas will emerge from discussion and it is therefore essential that students come to class well prepared to discuss the assignments.

Required Books

(Note: A Xerox packet of about 70 pp. is being sold for \$2)

- Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*
- Tom Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*

- Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*
- Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*
- Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmel*

Course Requirements

A. Seminar Participation -- 1/3 of grade

Attendance and participation are an essential part of this course! The quality of any seminar depends on those participating in it. All of us participating in the seminar must commit ourselves to reading the assignments and thinking about them before the class period when they will be discussed. Judgment on the grade will be made on 1) attendance, 2) quality of expression, 3) quality of listening to others, and 4) regularity of participation without always dominating the discussion. The skill of listening and responding to others is very important in a seminar. Involvement in the masking and ritual exercises will be a part of this grade.

Masking Exercises: We will choose masks on the first day of class. On Sept. 24, each student will bring a segment of a myth that he/she has written about the character of the mask. The segment should not exceed 5 minutes in reading time. It should be a narrative, story form rather than in analytical, expository style (we will discuss this in class). The class will be divided in 6 groups with 3-4 people in each. They will work up a ritualized segment of approximately 15 minutes in length that reveal the masks through direct action by means of the interplay among the various masks in each group. (More explicit instructions will be presented on Sept. 24 to explain how the groups will proceed.) These enactments will be presented by the groups on Nov. 10. On Nov. 12 the class will discuss their understanding of masks, images and ritual identity, based in part on the enactments.

C. Philosophical Journal -- 1/3 of grade

1. Each student will keep an **up-to-date** journal of reflections on the readings and on the class sessions. The journal must be kept in a loose-leaf binder that will hold regular 8 ½" X 11" sheets of paper. I require the **lightweight** paper folders with pockets. All entries must have **wide margins** on one side of paper for my comments and dialogue with you. You need to do **all** eight entries. Turn in on shelf opposite my office **by 3:30 p.m. on Friday of due date, except for entry #8, which is due Wednesday at last class.** I'll return journals with its grade (and grade for Seminar Participation) on Friday, Dec. 12 by 1 p.m.

2. Each entry should normally be focused around a single theme or line of thought. It **must** reflect the **readings** that **precede** the "JD" in the topic's section above. (You do not need to deal comprehensively with every reading, but must bring the relevant readings to bear on the theme or topic you choose.) You will probably want to consider the videos and class discussions in the period when you write the entry.

3. Each journal entry should be about 2 pages long. The due dates are listed on the schedule above and should be met. (Only very serious reasons should necessitate asking for extensions or excusing late entries.) Students who get behind in their journals do not do as well in understanding the material in the course as those who keep up. It is far better to occasionally write a mediocre entry than to get behind. (Note: "JD" is after the last assignment that is expected to be taken into account when writing the entry.)

4. The Nature of a Philosophical Journal

An entry in the journal is somewhere between a formal short paper and a diary-like, spontaneous

thought. It is unlike a finished paper because issues may be left dangling and uncompleted--perhaps you will return to the issue in subsequent entries, relating it to new contexts. It is unlike a diary entry, because it is careful reflection rather than short spontaneous ideas. You are expected to work through an idea, turning it over, seeing its ramifications and limitations. It is both "unpacking" an idea and "fleshing it out." (A metaphor from painting that might be helpful is "the careful sketch" rather than the "completed picture.") In the first couple of entries you should be concerned with **understanding** the major concerns of the course and with **developing** your questions that relate to the course. As the seminar proceeds, you may begin to play with some of the answers to your concerns and intellectual questions. But **remember** that all answers that are profound will raise more questions than they will answer. The more you understand the limitations of your answers, the more interesting will be your journal.

5. Grading--I will not grade individual entries, but will judge the entire journal after you turn in the final entry. The progress and development of your thinking throughout the semester are as important as the quality of thought in individual entries. You will have plenty of feedback on each entry that you write and will have a general idea about how well you are doing. Don't hesitate to request a conference with me to discuss your progress at any time. **NOTE: The entire journal is due, Wednesday, Dec. 10 in class.** (It will be graded and returned by 1 p.m., Friday, Dec. 12.)

D. A 6 to 8 page paper--1/3 of grade

You are asked to write a paper, drawing from much of the reading material in the course, on **one** of the following topics:

1. Drawing upon material in the course, explain how the dynamics of ritual can help us to
2. understand the creative process.
3. Drawing upon material in the course, explore how "masks" and "masking" help to explain
4. how the creative process involves individuals within their cultural contexts.
5. Explore a major question that emerged from your journal, showing how material in the course helped you frame the question and understand possible answers to it.

DUE DATE: By 1 p.m. on Wednesday, Dec. 17.

Notes: The point of writing this paper is to draw together the ideas and readings in the course. This is not a research paper. However, use footnotes for any material that was not part of the course. Put author and page numbers in parenthesis for material that you refer to that was in course. Type and double-space your papers, leaving 1 ½ inch margin on one side.

Topics and Reading Assignments

(Note: "JD" means "Journal Due"; it is due **by 3:30 p.m. on the Fridays** listed below. It should center on readings, class discussions and videos that **precede** the "JD." Turn in on Shelf opposite my office on second floor of Kanakadea Hall.)

Image, Myth and Meaning

Sept. 1--Course Introduction; **MASKING: EXERCISE I**

Sept. 3--"Huichol Myth," (handout: pp. 189-200 in Fernando Benitez, *In the Magic Land of Peyote*, 1975; Video: *Popul Vuh*)

Sept. 8--Eck, pp. 1-31

Sept. 10--Eck, pp. 32-51; **#1 JD: due Sept. 12**

Ritual and Meaning

Sept. 15--Driver, pp. 3-51

Sept. 17--Driver, pp. 52-75; **#2 JD: due Sept. 19**

Sept. 22--Deren, pp. 5-53

Sept. 24--Deren, pp. 54-150 (read a few parts well); **MASKING: EXERCISE II**

Sept. 29--Deren, pp. 151-224

Oct. 1--Deren, pp. 225-262; **#3 JD: due Oct. 3**

Metaphoric Play Through Ritual

Oct. 6--Artaud, pp. 7-52

Oct. 8--Artaud, pp. 53-83

Oct. 13--Artaud, pp. 84-141

Oct. 15--Video: *Butoh--Dance of Darkness*; **#4 JD: due Oct. 17**

Oct. 22--Clifford Geertz, "Balinese Cockfight" (handout--ch. 15 from Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973); Video: *Mask of Rangda* (Hartley Films, Cos Cob, CT)

Oct. 27--Driver, pp. 79-106

Oct. 29--Driver, pp. 152-191 **#5 JD: due Oct. 31**

Nov. 3--Peter Brook, "Leaning on the Moment" (handout from *Parabola* IV:2, 46-59)

Nov. 5--Peter Brook, "Lie and the Glorious Adjective" (handout from *Parabola* VI:3, 60-73); **#6 JD: due Nov. 7**

Nov. 10--No Assignment; **MASKING: EXERCISE III**

Nov. 12--Discussion of Masking Exercise III

Nov. 17--S. and R. Larsen, "The Healing Mask"; Ron Jenkins, "TwoWay Mirrors" (handouts from *Parabola* VI:3, 17-21, 78-84)

Nov. 19--Video: *Paris Is Burning*; **#7 JD: due Nov. 21**

Metaphoric Play Through Myth and Metaphor

Dec. 1--Griaule, pp. 1-55

Dec. 3--Griaule, pp. 56-98

Dec. 8--Griaule, pp. 99-114, 186-191; #8 JD: due Nov. 10

E. "CONCLUSION: THINKING THROUGH IMAGES"

Dec. 10--Ritual Exercise

Paper Due Wednesday, December 17, 1:00 p.m.

Pedagogical Reflections

As stated at the beginning of the course syllabus, this course centers on how world views get established and transmuted through myth and ritual. The course is primarily discussion. Sometimes the discussion of the readings and topics begin through some carefully chosen questions by instructor. (I think this is essential preparation of instructor for a seminar course, even if used as backup.) Sometimes the discussion is initiated by instructor reading a portion from one or two students' journals (with their permission, of course). Sometimes the discussion is initiated through a more general question: "What issues did you find significant in the reading?"

The journal assignment is critical for this course--in fact, I use it in any seminar course that I teach. I think it really helps students to read an assignment, if they have some focus--or an interesting question that they are trying to answer. The journal helps give them that. I write a lot in margins and at end of an entry--I actually enjoy using this as an opportunity for an intellectual dialogue with students. I return the journals promptly (the next class) and sometimes choose to read from them. This often gives confidence to someone who has insights, but is a little reluctant to share them with the class. Colleagues always ask me if I have trouble "grading" journals--it is 1/3 of grade in the course. Actually I find this the easiest assignment to grade, because one can tell how much effort students are putting into the reading etc. If people write a general entry on a topic that comes out of class discussion, I'll frequently conclude with something like this: "Good entry because it shows creative thinking about this topic, but try to draw some insights from the reading. For example, you might have used this example from _____ to flesh out the issue you're dealing with."

I don't know how much more to write about the masking assignments. Note the rationale above: "Special attention to masking will help focus on "image" at the point where ritual and myth intersect with the performing and visual arts. Masking is also a place where identity and culture meet; it therefore raises the question about how the creative process is both a personal and social phenomenon." The reason I developed the masking experience initially was because I wanted some way to show how culture affects personal identity. This issue is very important for art students who both want their art to be "their own expression," and also "to communicate visually with others." It helps to see how we select cultural "images" (broadly conceived) to clarify our experiences and therefore our identities. Mask is the place where identity meets culture. The first part of the assignment is to invest the mask, chosen by students, with a story--i.e., to make it part of culture. The second part is to react to other masks while wearing one's own. Eventually this ends in a performance before the class.


One "bonus" that I had not initially expected was that a number of students say that they couldn't really remember what happened during the performance, because they were so focused in the mask. This helps to explain "possession" and is one reason for my using Maya Deren's book on Voudou. (I use Karen Brown's, Mama Lola, in another course; I actually like Brown's book better, but some students take both courses.)

Faculty sometimes ask me whether I fear this exercise because it might create psychological problems. Others ask me whether I think this goes outside the bounds of scholarship. My brief answer is that it's about time that people teaching in the humanities try pedagogical exercises from the performing and visual arts. Performing arts teachers have no problem, for example, asking someone to take on a role in an acting class. I'm a strong believer in the use of simulations in courses, and have sometimes used them. I have never had any student in the 12 or so years I've been using this exercise "flip out." We should also remember that it "could be" psychologically

damaging for students to question their reading of the bible etc. Education is risky! Part of our roles is to help students grow intellectually. I also need to emphasize the obvious: that the masking exercises are complemented by a lot of readings in the course that give it a theoretical framework.

You will note one other "ritual exercise" on the syllabus. I am indebted to Ronald Grimes for developing this exercise, though I use it in a different context and different manner than he does. I have students bring in "an object that is important to them, but not so important that they would be offended if other students touched and moved it." Each student is to take about 30 seconds to ritually place the object in the center of our circle of chairs. After all the objects are placed, individuals are free to move one object at a time to a new location. This is done for about 40 minutes. We then discuss what happened. The point to this exercise as I use it is to experientially understand how we can "think" through "material objects," an issue that develops throughout the course.

Finally, this course emphasizes the process of creation through symbolic means. It is complemented by another course, "Artists, Shamans and Cosmology," which emphasizes how "individuals" create worlds of meaning through symbolic means. That is why some obvious books that could be used in this course, such as Ron Grimes Marrying and Burying, are absent here, but in the companion course.

Select a location 

http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwaar/syllabi/myth_ritual_creative_process-peterson.html

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